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French Nomads' Resistance 1939-1946

LISE FOISNEAU
VALENTIN MERLIN

We are the hunters, not them.
FRÉDÉRIC DORKEL, 2014.¹

1. Introduction

“Our role in the Resistance has been ignored, even though I ran into many other *voyageurs* (travellers) during clandestine fights between 1944 and 1945.”² This testimony of nomad and resistance-fighter Raymond Gurême well illustrates the issue addressed in this paper. While making “nomads”³ the subject of compulsory residence orders and sending them to internment camps, following the decree of April 6, 1940, have been studied by French historians, nomads’ reactions to such policies have been persistently neglected. The result is that a selected focus on persecutions by the Vichy regime and the German occupier assigns nomads a victim role.⁴

¹ “*Les chasseurs, c’est pas eux, c’est nous.*” Line from the movie by Jean-Charles Hue, *Mange tes morts. Tu ne diras point*, 2014.

² Raymond Gurême, *Interdit aux nomades* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 2011), 156.

³ We are using the term “nomad” referring to an administrative category implemented by the July 16, 1912 Act, relative to the exercise of itinerant trades and the movement of all types of travelling persons. This law created three categories: itinerant merchant, “*forain*” and nomad. The difference between the *forain* and the nomad categories lay in the recognition, in the first instance, of the fact that *forains* have a “proper occupation”. The nomad category was created by the French legislator, to refer to a specific population, without using racial criteria. In this category, one could include *Manouches*, *Yéniches*, *Sinté*, Roma, Catalan Gypsies, French Travellers, but also non-Roma individuals who were included in that category because of their poverty. Using the term “nomad” allowed us not to use other ethnic names, the use of which would be anachronistic.

⁴ For example, see Emmanuel Filhol and Marie-Christine Hubert, *Les Tsiganes en France. Un sort à part. 1940-1946* (Paris: Perrin, 2009). See also Denis Peschanski, *Les Tsiganes en France, 1939-1946* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2010).

However, anyone wishing to change this perspective faces the obstacle of making a too sharp institutional break between the Third Republic and Vichy France, whereas there is a continuity in the application of administrative procedures affecting nomads during the two periods.⁵ As a matter of fact, under the 1912 Nomad Act, the Third Republic put in place a strict oversight regime including inter alia restrictions on the movement of nomads, an obligation to conform to the model of nuclear family, surveillance of hygiene conditions, and a requirement to carry special travel documents (anthropometric identity notebooks). In September 1939, after the declaration of war, the French government relied on the existing administrative regime for nomads to impose internment to some of them and compulsory residence to others. Those decisions provoked different forms of reactions among the so called nomads, and some of those reactions can be described as acts of resistance. But resisting the French administration was not a new thing.

Indeed, research into administrative divisional archives reveals that tactics used by the nomads against the French administration after 1912 were later used against the German occupier and the Vichy regime. During World War II, nomads' resistance also clearly focused on the occupier and took the form of armed struggle, thus bringing in line these tactics and their target with those of other part of French *Résistance*. Circumvention [*contournement*] of the administration was to a certain extent a "survival strategy", but it was not only that. Its aim was also clearly a political protest. But while the French *Résistance* contributed to bring people of different origins together, the participation of the nomads was not enough to transform in the long run their relationship with the rest of French population and French administration. Tragic events that took place during the liberation show how nomad families were unjustly accused, and also explain the absence of recognition of nomads' actions in the Resistance afterwards.

This paper aims at contributing to the knowledge of a particularly complex period in the history of nomads in France. Apart from scattered information in books that do not relate directly to the issue at hand⁶, only a few articles or books deal with the resistance of nomads. They can be cited in chronological order by publication date: a document on Tikno Adjam, a member of the Ardennes *maquis*, written by Father Fleury after the war;⁷ the account of Jan Yoors who acted as a liaison between the Resistance and the Gypsies;⁸ an article by Joseph Valet who gathered testimonies about the role of Auvergne's travelers in the Resistance;⁹ and Raymond Gurême's memoirs recounting his political activity

⁵ We refer here to the continuity between the Vichy policies (July 10, 1940 – August 20, 1944) and the control mechanisms put in place by the Third Republic (1870–1940)—particularly with regard to the status of "nomads" that was established by the law of July 16, 1912.

⁶ Donald Kenrick and Grattan Puxon, *Destins gitans* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995).

⁷ DA (Departmental Archive) Vienne, Archives of Father père Fleury, 82 J 2. *Tikno the Gypsy, 1875-1948: biographie et anthologie d'œuvres de Tikno Adjam (in English, 110 fol.)*.

⁸ Jan Yoors, *La Croisée des chemins. La guerre secrète des Tsiganes 1940-1944* (Paris: Phébus, 1992).

⁹ Joseph Valet, "Gitans et Voyageurs d'Auvergne durant la guerre 1939-45," *Études tsiganes*, no. 6, (1995): 211-219.



during the war.¹⁰ Unfortunately even some of these very few documents are not solid historical sources. For instance, Tikno Adjam is probably an invention by Father Fleury in order to spread the Gospel amongst Travellers, as a proselytising tool, and Yoors' book has never been studied closely enough to declare whether it is fictional or not.

In order to overcome this scarcity of information, we have chosen to systematically review French administrative divisional archives that contain individual and group files relating to nomads. Indeed, these archives contain substantial information, because the law of 16 July, 1912 required prefectures to keep all information on people classified as nomads. The records of the period from 1939 to 1946 are particularly informative in administrative divisions where the nomads were forced to reside at home or in a restricted area. Such records include prefectural orders subjecting nomads to this "compulsory residence", censuses, various correspondence between the internees and the prefecture, notes from the intelligence services of the French police (*Renseignements Généraux*), reports of violations of the decree of 6 April, 1940 delivery of identity documents (*cartes anthropométriques*), searches for missing persons, etc. Since some individuals were later involved in the justice system, there are case files, or other documents related to legal proceedings, that provide additional information on defendants and the conditions of their trial. We consulted 22 archives from administrative divisions, those with internment camps or compulsory residence for nomads, and those bordering the latter administrative divisions. On the basis of the information collected, we also contacted the descendants of people who appeared in the archives and conducted interviews with them, if possible.

The first part of this paper offers a perspective on legislation regarding nomads since the 1912 law. This explains why the reactions of nomads during the war period can only be understood as part of a longer history. The second part discusses various forms of resistance involving the nomads: (1) continuation of tactics already in place under the Third Republic (use of false identities, circumventing the law); (2) acts of protest, unrest, disturbances and plans for riots in internment camps for nomads; (3) camp escapes; and (4) forms of engagement in an armed struggle. The last part of this paper describes the treatment of nomads during the summer of 1944, particularly by groups of *résistants* (members of French resistance movements), which often included summary executions and arrests. This phenomenon was not denounced by the victims, probably because of the antipathetic nature of the charges against them and the difficulty of defending oneself in a national liberation context. With the restoration of the Republic, everyone resumed one's place in society. Thus, the heroic actions of so called nomads were never recognised, and their role in French history during WWII has remained marginalised.

¹⁰ Gurême, *Interdit aux nomades*, *op. cit.*

2. Being classified as a “Nomad” during World War II

Laws and legislation on nomads

Institutionalized discrimination against Romani populations in France during World War II was not a novelty of the Vichy regime or the German administration in occupied France, and it did not cease after its liberation.¹¹ However repressive they were, the first policies of the Vichy government related to the Romani populations, including compulsory residence and internment, were only a continuation and aggravation of an already restrictive and discriminatory policy.

At the end of the 19th century, parliamentarians of the Third Republic had already discussed the possibility of having a specific law focusing on the *Romanichel* or Bohemians. However, the process of adopting such legislation was hampered by the difficulty of identifying the criteria to define the population concerned.¹² The characteristics discussed in the Chamber of Deputies (the lower level of parliament) in 1907 reflected existing stereotypes. References to the Bohemians included: “those who do nothing”; “in the winter they are to be found in the South, and in the summer in the North”; “who have no fixed nationality or civic identity, no profession and no home”.¹³ Up until the vote on the law on 16 July, 1912, the deputies continued to elaborate on a “proper” administrative category. Avoiding explicit reference to racial criteria, the new category focused on the supposed nomadism of Bohemians and presupposed that these individuals were dangerous.¹⁴ The term “nomads” which, the French administration used until 1969, was defined as follows:

Nomads generally live in caravans and have no domicile, residence, or home. Most of them are vagrants, having ethnic character specific to the Romani, bohemians, Gypsies, travellers, who, under the guise of a problematic profession, walk along the roads without concern for hygiene or legal regulations. They have, or pretend to have, a proper occupation. They say they are tinsmiths, basket-makers, chair repairers, or horse-dealers. Nomads live throughout France in miserable conditions in caravans which contain large families¹⁵.

Individuals falling under this new administrative category were required to carry an “anthropometric” card and their movement was monitored. After France’s declaration of

¹¹ Henriette Asséo, “Pourquoi tant de haine ? L’intolérance administrative à l’égard des Tsiganes de la fin du 19e siècle à la veille de la Deuxième Guerre mondiale,” *Diasporas, Histoire et Sociétés*: “Haines”, Patrick Cabanel no. 10, 1er trimestre (2007): 50-67.

¹² Question by Mr. Jourde to Fernand David, *Chamber of Deputies, France*, 29 October, 1907

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Félix Challier, “La Nouvelle loi sur la circulation des nomades: loi du 16 juillet 1912,” [(Phd Diss., Université de Paris, 1913), 318.

¹⁵ 3 October, 1913 Decree regarding the 16 July, 1912 Law. From that time on the French authorities used the term “nomads” to refer to Roma and “gypsies” of all kinds.



war on Germany, they were subjected to further constraints. The 22 October, 1939 military decree prohibited nomads from travelling in eight administrative divisions in the West of France. The 18 November, 1939 decree on the internment of French illegal “undesirables” foreshadowed the April 6, 1940 legislative decree requiring nomads “to live under the supervision of the police”. This decree aimed at limiting the movement of nomads because they “constituted a danger and had to be contained for national security reasons”.¹⁶ It was argued that the nomads and their “incessant movements” were likely to “surprise troop movements, [lead to the discovery of] troop settlements, [and the identification of] exact locations of defence operations” and they would “communicate that information to enemy agents”. The nomads were seen as a nation within a nation and were suspected of a lack of loyalty towards France.

The 1940 decree applied “to all individuals, whatever their nationality, who were subject to the provisions of Article 3 of the 1912 Law”.¹⁷ The minister of interior authorized prefects to decide whether to opt for imposing compulsory residence orders on nomads or intern them in already built camps. Nevertheless, the decree established a preference for subjecting nomads to compulsory residence orders, because it allowed for the continuation of the Third Republic policy of separating, rather than bringing together, extended families. For example, a circular from March 1935, supplementing the 1912 Law, stated that the 57 persons belonging to the Demestre family group no longer had the right to travel together. The group was hence divided into four subgroups and were assigned to separate administrative divisions. Thereby they could travel, but were not allowed to come into contact with each other. The compulsory residence orders also had the advantage of accelerating nomads’ settlement.¹⁸ On the other hand, the state of emergency imposed during wartime allowed actions that the Republic could not have otherwise implemented for constitutional reasons. As the Sub-Prefect of the Loire-Inférieure wrote on 13 April, 1940, “I had already suggested that they [the nomads] be sent to guarded camps, but at that time the legislation did not allow such a step to be taken. The decree of April 6, 1940, however, made this possible”.¹⁹

However, the German occupation added a new element to the legislative arsenal already in place. On October 4, 1940, a German military administration ordered the internment of “Gypsies” in the occupied zone.²⁰ Concerning nomads, France had made similar decisions during World War I, but those measures were then limited.²¹ Internment in the occupied territory was also linked to other measures: i.e. formerly authorized professions were banned and punishable by internment. Thus the pace of internment accelerated, for example, when in January 1941, Germans prohibited, by order, the exercise of all travelling

¹⁶ DA Vienne, 4 M 1443 (6 April, 1940) decree.

¹⁷ DA Vienne, 4 M 1443 (29 April, 1940) decree.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ DA Loire-Atlantique, 2 Z 140 (13 April, 1940) Letter from the sub-prefect to the Prefect of Loire-Inférieure.

²⁰ Filhol and Hubert, *Les Tsiganes*, 88.

²¹ Emmanuel Filhol, *Un camp de concentration français. Les Tsiganes alsaciens-lorrains à Crest, 1915-1919* (Grenoble: Presses universitaires de Grenoble, 2004)

professions. In April 1941, this prohibition, however, was lifted for travelling merchants and *forains* (traders at markets and fairs),²² but not for nomads whose movement remained strictly forbidden.

As stated above, in the non-occupied zone, the situation was different as prefects could decide to place nomads from their administrative divisions into internment camps or to impose compulsory residence orders on them. A large majority of prefects preferred to subject small groups of nomads to compulsory residence orders. On October 29, 1940, Cantal's prefect carefully created twelve groups ("the Weiss group", "the Hoffmann Philippe group", "the Lopez group", etc.) and assigned each one to a different hamlet.²³ Other prefects, such as in the Allier, through which the demarcation line passed, preferred to ban all nomads from their administrative divisions. Thus the nomads of Allier found themselves in compulsory residence in nearby Cantal. Some prefects sent the nomads to pre-existing internment camps that already contained different populations (i.e. Pyrénées-Orientales) or decided to open camps especially for nomads (Bouches-du-Rhône, Hautes-Pyrénées). As an example, on May 12, 1941, the Lannemezan camp (Hautes-Pyrénées) included more than 220 nomads above the age of 13 years, and, since those under 13 were not counted, the total population of this camp can therefore be estimated at around 350 people.²⁴

Classification

The decree of April 1940 requiring internment and compulsory residence measures applied only to nomads as defined under the 1912 Law, and other persons usually associated with nomadic lifestyle, such as *forains* and groups coming from Eastern Europe, were not covered by the decree. However, the administration would later expand the initial category. The prefectures would reclassify these groups to include them in the nomad category.

Changing categories: Why some forains became nomads

On September 7, 1939, the Haag family of traders [*forain*] arrived in the village of Châteauneuf-sur-Charente. They were part of a group of refugees from the Moselle. A year later, the mayor of the village wrote to the prefect to point out that the family did not want to leave the village and suggested that he "order them to comply with measures applicable to nomads".²⁵ Following an investigation into the case, the gendarmerie concluded that they

²² *Supra* note 3.

²³ DA Cantal, 2 SC 6 796 (29 October, 1940) Census of the nomads compelled to a compulsory residence in the Cantal.

²⁴ DA Hautes-Pyrénées, 321 W 117 (12 May, 1941) Census of the nomads compelled to compulsory residence in the Hautes-Pyrénées.

²⁵ DA Charente, 1 W 41 (6 November, 1940) Letter from the mayor of Châteauneuf-sur-Charente to the Prefect of Charente.



met “all conditions” to be included in the nomad category because they had “no domicile or fixed residence in France” and that “its members exercised no profession and do no work”, thus they “can only be classified as nomads”.²⁶ In December 1940, the prefect of Charente reclassified the Haag family as nomads, and they were then interned at the Alliers camp in Angoulême.

Such transfers from the category of *forain* to nomad would take place throughout the war, both in the free and occupied zones. For instance, in 1943, having already been subjected to compulsory residence the “Jean Schutt” and “Paul Hinderschied” families in a town of the Haute-Loire were reclassified as nomads because they lost their *forain* identity documents. The report by the gendarmerie concluded that they must be classified as nomads as they were “terrorizing the population”, lived only from “rapine and poaching” and that “their children did not go to school”.²⁷ Or in the case of the Chardelin-Capeleau *forains*, they were identified by the prefect of the Lot-et-Garonne as nomads in August 1943, with the “sole objective of making sure they were subject to compulsory residence order”.²⁸ From correspondence between Alfred Capeleau and the prefect in 1945 it becomes clear that this re-categorization was the result of an “excess of zeal by a policeman”, who pursued this family because one of their sons “was a member of the Resistance”.²⁹ In December 1946, the sub-prefect of Marmande gave them back their *forain* identity documents.

However, many families would not be as fortunate as the Chardelin-Capeleau family and their transfer to the nomad category would be definitive. Such was the case of the family of Celestin Belloni, a World War I hero, honoured twice (*faits remarquables*).³⁰ In 1945, he unsuccessfully asked to be transferred back into the *forain* category. In 1947, he wrote directly to General de Gaulle, but once again his request was not granted.

An expandable category

The transfer from the *forain* to the nomad category was not the only way increasing the number of people subjected to constraints as a result of reclassifying them as nomads. Some people who lived neither on the road nor in caravans would still officially be classified as “nomads”.

²⁶ DA Charente, 1 W 41 (November, 1940) Report by the gendarmerie on the Haag family.

²⁷ DA Haute Loire, 451 W 9 (30 November, 1943) Report by the gendarmerie of Paulhaguet on the Schutt and the Hinderschied families.

²⁸ DA Lot et Garonne, 907 W 14 (August, 1943) Letter from the Prefect of Lot-et-Garonne.

²⁹ DA Lot et Garonne, 907 W 14 (18 July, 1944) Letter from Caplaud to the Prefect of Lot-et-Garonne.

³⁰ DA Cantal, 2 SC 7242. “Célestin Benoni, 2nd class soldier of the 1st Company of the 415th Infantry Regiment. Grenadier elite, with remarkable cold blood, able and willing for all perilous missions. On July 15, 1918, during action, at a critical moment, he armed himself with a machine-gun, whose gunners had fallen, and by his violent fire helped to stop the assailant in his tracks”. Quote about Célestin Benoni by the Commanding General of the 12th Infantry Division,

In May 1940, the sub-prefect of Châteaubriant wrote to the lieutenant of the national police, saying that “evacuees from the Paris region” were in fact “Gypsies”.³¹ Since December 1939, many families from Paris had settled near Châteaubriant. These included Kalderash and Lovara Roma families. The prefecture of the Loire-Inférieure administrative division referred to them as “White Russians”, even though some were Spanish. Of these 93 people, only 16 had French identity documents, while others had foreign identity documents. The sub-prefect of Marmande wrote that the latter “must be considered as nomads and subjected to compulsory residence”.³² He based this conclusion on “the diversity of the birthplaces of the different members of these families,” “their clothing” and “their way of life”.³³ Furthermore, he specified, that “the application of the decree of April 6, 1940 to these gypsies will be very well received in the region”.³⁴ Another example is the Maximoff family, who were Russian nationals and received nomad identity cards from the prefect of the Hautes-Pyrénées in June 1941,³⁵ which would lead to their internment at the Lannemezan camp and allowed for their continued treatment as nomads until 1946.

Therefore, by the end of World War II the nomad category included sedentary as well as nomadic people, street vendors and *forains*, and anyone associated with a bohemian lifestyle. From the analysis of the administrative classification of nomads it can be concluded that actors in the French administration—including prefects, police officers, mayors and other officials—were granted great discretion in interpreting the 1912 Law. On the other hand, the subtlety of the law escaped the German authorities for the most part, thus, they could sometimes be convinced that certain people were wrongly interned as a result of their misclassification as nomads. For instance, Paul Demestre managed to be freed from the Linas-Monthléry camp by explaining to the German authorities that he was mistakenly classified as nomad since: he was not a “Gypsy”, but a rich travelling salesman.³⁶

3. The context of challenging the administration

After this brief overview of the legal situation of those identified as nomads, we now consider the daily administrative constraints they faced. Indeed, if one wants to analyse the different forms of resistance, one must first understand the concrete situation in which the nomads had to confront the administration.

³¹ DA Loire-Atlantique, 2 Z 140 (May, 1940) Letter from the Sub-Prefect of Châteaubriant to the lieutenant of gendarmerie.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ DA Hautes-Pyrénées, 226 W 27 (June, 1941) Nomad identity documents of the Maximoff family.

³⁶ National Archives, AJ 40 552. Request for release from the Linas Monthléry camp by Paul Demestre.



Complaints and petitions from neighbours

On April 13, 1940, the prefect of the Creuse issued a decree to gather nomads from across the administrative division into the La Chassagne camp. More than 110 people were interned in this place.³⁷ Four months later, the inhabitants of La Chassagne sent the prefect a petition to ask him to proceed with the “evacuation” of these nomads. They argued that “living in the proximity [of these nomads] had become disturbing,” and their “idleness” generated “thefts, and degradations of all kinds, the damage of which could not be estimated”.³⁸ Upon receipt of the petition, the prefect ordered an inquiry. The report of the Gendarmes’ investigation stated that two of their horses had “wandered” onto the cultivated lands of a neighbour and that they were responsible for theft of potatoes, which the investigation did not confirm. One resident explained to the police officers that she “heard the neighbours say that the nomads were engaged in raiding and destroyed the hedgerow fencing on cultivated land”.³⁹ There were many rumours but the police failed to confirm them with proven facts. Even though no guilt was established by the investigation, the prefect of the Creuse decided to have the nomads distributed into seven different localities, far removed from each other.⁴⁰

In the same week in August 1940, in another town of the Creuse, the inhabitants resorted to the same method. The neighbours of Bourgneuf signed a collective complaint against “the *forains* and nomads who camped around Bourgneuf”.⁴¹ The proceedings of the investigation revealed a similar rhetoric to the one in the La Chassagne complaint: “I did not catch these people red-handed, but [...]” the neighbours had heard many things. They were deeply convinced that the misdeeds that they themselves had not witnessed were the work of the nomads. However, no one was able to directly testify to a crime attributable to the nomads. Only one resident was certain of a precise fact: “In my absence, [the children] have fun in my meadow”. Another resident complained about “the owners of a grey goat” which “wandered” onto his field. The proceedings concluded with the opinion of the mayor of Bourgneuf: “the *forains* had stayed here long enough and been the subject of frequent complaints from the inhabitants, so their departure would contribute to the maintenance of order.” Following numerous petitions and complaints, the police commissioner of Aubusson recommended transferring the men to a work camp and women to the Argelès’ internment camp⁴²

The prefect of the Creuse also preferred to disperse the nomads to various localities and encouraged local and national police to arrest all nomads who left their compulsory residence. In Creuse, from 1940 until the end of compulsory residence in 1946, the inhabitants of the towns to which the nomads were assigned constantly complained of their behaviour.

³⁷ DA Creuse, 976 W 199 (13 April, 1940) Decree gathering 110 nomads into the La Chassagne camp.

³⁸ DA Creuse, 976 W 199 (5 August, 1940) Petition against the nomads from the inhabitants of La Chassagne.

³⁹ DA Creuse, 976 W 199 (12 August, 1940) Report on the petition against the nomads.

⁴⁰ DA Creuse, 976 W 199 (14 September, 1940) Letter from the Sub-Prefect of Aubusson to the Prefect of Creuse.

⁴¹ DA Creuse, 976 W 199 (10 August, 1940) Report on the petition from the inhabitants of Bourgneuf.

⁴² DA Creuse, 976 W 199 (14 November, 1940) Letter from the police commissioner to the Prefect of Creuse.

For example, the inhabitants of Chambon-sur-Voueize sent the prefect, in April 1943, a petition saying that they had been “subjected, for nearly three years, to the presence of the Adam tribe, [...] it had not been possible to be free of their cumbersome presence, despite repeated complaints.” This “tribe” was accused of being “a permanent danger [...] from the point of view of both hygiene and public health”. Moreover, this “red family of Spain” were “visited very often by many passers-by”.⁴³ The prefect then made a request for internment of these nomads in the Saliers camp (Bouches-du-Rhône), but was informed that the camp was “full”.⁴⁴ The prefect then assigned these nomads to residence in another town where they would be under police surveillance.

In the occupied zone the procedures of transfers to camps were accelerated, and sometimes provoked, by similar complaints from villagers. In April 1940, an inhabitant of Le Mans wrote to the mayor of the city who then informed the prefect of Sarthe that the nomads “are harmful to our neighbourhoods and I believe, even more harmful to national security.”⁴⁵ The prefects of the occupied zone took these petitions very seriously. For instance, the prefect of the Loire-Inférieure wrote to the commander of the gendarmerie of Nantes to conduct “an investigation into the actions of these nomads” and requested that “if the charges against them prove well-founded, propose measures of internment [for them]”⁴⁶ In many cases, the documents indicated that if residents and mayors had not lodged complaints against the nomads they could have remained in compulsory residence without being sent to internment camps.

The day-to-day reality of compulsory residence

Until now, historiography has only studied the internment of nomads in detail and has left little room for the study of compulsory residence. Compulsory residence orders were implemented with great zeal, especially in the administrative divisions of the Massif Central: the families were broken up; spouses were often even assigned to reside in different localities because they did not have marriage certificates; authorizations for work outside the town were extremely rare, and some families did not even have a trailer for shelter and slept on the ground, suffering from cold and hunger, and were subjected to daily police checks.

On 7 September, 1942, four gendarmes checked the papers of a nomad named Wiastersheim. They searched him and found some ration cards in his possession that were not his. They then checked all members of the “Wiastersheim tribe” and realized that they had ten cards while there were only seven of them. The gendarmes carried out “searches near their dwelling” and discovered “a woman and two little girls hidden in the ferns”. The 47-year-old

⁴³ DA Creuse, 987 W 51 (1943) File “Adam Tribe”.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ DA Sarthe, 4 M 144 (1 May, 1940) Letter from the mayor of Le Mans to the Prefect of Sarthe.

⁴⁶ DA Loire-Atlantique, 1694 W 34 (4 July, 1942) Letter from the Prefect of Loire-Inférieure to commander of gendarmerie.



woman, Marie Wiastersheim née Berger-Maillet, mother of seven children, had abandoned her compulsory residence to join the father of her children. Since they had been living together in cohabitation and were not married, they were not assigned to the same compulsory residence. In August, they officially married in order to ask for a common residence but this was refused by the prefect. Marie went “with two young girls, Marinette, 8, and Reine, 5, to be with her husband.” Marie says that since her arrival in this town, she “lived in the surrounding woods for fear of being discovered by the police”. The gendarmes called on a resident of the village to thoroughly search Marie Wiastersheim and arrest her, based on a violation of Article 1 of the Decree of April 6, 1940 then placed her in the cell of their barracks while waiting to be brought before the French state prosecutor at Gueret.⁴⁷

The conditions of compulsory residence were such that, despite difficult beginnings solidarities did begin to form. Christophe Moreigne recalled an episode of compulsory residence in the Creuse, regarding the Fourmann family. One of the nomads became part of the local football team, the Fourneaux Sporting Club, and became one of its best players and, “in the autumn of 1942, the club’s leaders won the award of ‘a circulation card valid on Sundays and public holidays for the duration of the administrative divisional football season’”.⁴⁸ These local co-operations would sometimes transform into co-operations of resistance, as described in the next section.

Compulsory residence was organized by the prefectures: it was they who decided on places of residence, composition of groups, and the granting of laissez-passes. They were helped by the police and the gendarmerie which controlled and stopped nomads. The nomads were very closely watched: if they did not respect their place of compulsory residence, they were sent to prison and, if they reoffended after serving their sentence, they were interned in disciplinary camps like Fort-Barraux, Nexon or Brens.

Arrests occurred daily. Reports from the gendarmerie reveal that some arrests did not go easily. On July 3, 1943, in the Lot-et-Garonne, two gendarmes received a complaint from a farmer who said he saw three young men eating plums in his field, adding that two of his poultry were taken by a dog the day before in the evening. The gendarmes note in their report that the *forains* who lived near the canal “have a yellow dog that, according to rumours, was trained to catch chickens”.⁴⁹ The gendarmes then proposed that the farmer accompany them to the camp so that he himself could identify the young men he saw eating his plums. At the sight of the gendarmes, several young men fled the camp. Immediately, one of the gendarmes took out his weapon. As the *forains* did not respond to the order “Put your hands up”, the policeman “fired, without however, shooting at them”. The *forains* panicked and fled. The gendarmes then organized a search that lasted until two o’clock in the morning. The young men were arrested. One of them, who was 16 years old, said: “While passing a

⁴⁷ DA Creuse, 987 W 52 (7 September, 1942) Report on the arrest of Marie Wiastersheim.

⁴⁸ Christophe Moreigne, “Les Nomades dans la Creuse. Assignation à résidence et internement administratif. 1940-1946,” *Mémoires 2013 de la Société des sciences naturelles, historiques et archéologiques de la Creuse* (2012/2013) : 326.

⁴⁹ DA Lot-et-Garonne, 907 W 14 (3 July, 1943) Report regarding a theft of fruit and the rebellion of the *forains* Michel Chardelin and Paul Capleau.

plum tree my brother and my cousin picked some plums. As for me, I did not touch any of them. My brother gave me one that I ate. I did not notice if they picked up a lot, but I think they only took two”.

Nomads arrested for various crimes, such as the theft of plums, were placed in cells before being tried by correctional courts that severely condemned their offenses. Thus, from 1939 to January 1944, Antonia Dour was sentenced 12 times for three minor thefts, no presentation of identity documents, and violations of the Decree of April 6, 1940. Over the course of four years, she spent more than twenty-two months in prison.⁵⁰ Here again, the disproportion between the offenses and the punishments is flagrant. However, French officials, officially subordinates of the Occupier, acted without strict supervision and were thus free to act on their own.

French staff in the internment camps

Internment camps for nomads were run by an entirely French staff: the camp leader was always French, as were the gendarmes and camp guards, the doctors and nurses. The reports from the camps were sent by the camp commander to the prefect, and not to the *Feldkommandantur*. However, the Germans, who had the right of review, intervened in certain cases that we will detail below.

Marie Reinhard, interned at the camp of Chateaubriant (Loire-Inférieure), was the only one to have declared, during an investigation in 1941 into the actions of the guards and gendarmes of the camp that members of staff “are not mean” and “even rather funny”.⁵¹ Other nomads’ complaints and police reports suggest a rather different reality. The conditions of existence in the camps were unspeakable and the behaviour of the camp staff added to the suffering of those interned. Over a period of less than three weeks (January-February 1941) at Moisdon-la-Rivière camp, four very young children died. In two of these deaths, instead of referring to the hygiene conditions of the camp, three staff—the camp commander, a gendarme and a nurse—requested that “a case be opened against the parents of the deceased and their accomplices”. They believed that the facts “clearly established the responsibility of parents who are guilty of homicide by negligence”.⁵² This rhetoric of a reversal of perspectives is representative of what regularly occurred in the camps: each time an adverse event occurred, the nomads were blamed. If they cut up a wooden bed, it would not be an act that demonstrated the extreme cold that camp residents suffered, but criminal damage to equipment. If an internee declared that her “moral forces began [to] abandon her”, it was not a state of psychological suffering, due to poor living conditions, but the beneficial effect of the camp regime on amoral beings. “Given that nomadic moral forces should be characterized

⁵⁰ DA Lot, 1109 W 26 (9 July, 1944) Antonia Dour’s criminal record.

⁵¹ DA Loire-Atlantique, Chât 136. Judgement (10 July, 1941) Angèle Siegler.

⁵² DA Loire Atlantique, 43 W 152 (11 January, 1941) Report from the director of the La Forge’s internment camp for nomads, Moisdon-la-Rivière.



as amoral or immoral forces, it seems that Society does not have much to complain about abandoning or diminishing said forces".⁵³

Confinement to a camp thus constituted an intensification of the surveillance and harassment of the nomads by the administration. The primary concern of parents was a fear that their children would be taken away from them. The inhabitants of a town of the Loire-Inférieure wrote to the prefect of Nantes in 1943 to request the internment of a family under compulsory residence in their town and to "entrust the children of these same families to re-education centres".⁵⁴ Some internments would thus lead to the separation of children and parents. Whenever a family arrived at the Alliers camp (Charente), the Family Assistance office would ask the camp director the same question: "to make it known urgently, [...] whether the children of the family [X] were still dependants".⁵⁵ Therefore, many children would be entrusted, by force, to the charity led by Father Le Bideau. This charity was recognized for promoting the public interest in 1945 as it welcomed Jewish children.⁵⁶ There is less emphasis on the fact that, in the case of Gypsy children, the children were taken away from their parents. Emmanuel Filhol and Marie-Christine Hubert have shown that the administration of the Saliers camp (Bouches-du-Rhône) entrusted about 200 children to secular or religious institutions.⁵⁷ These assignments, sometimes definitive, took place against the will of the parents. In December 1943, in the Jargeau camp, a baby was taken from its mother on the pretext that she had escaped during the bombing of the camp without her child. However, the records reveal that the mother went to the nursery to pick up her child but the nurse in charge refused to give him to her, saying that she would then have to return to the camp after her evacuation in order to see her child again. Despite letters of protest from the father of the child, who was interned in another camp, the parents were deprived of parental authority and the child placed in social care until he was 18 years old.⁵⁸

In addition to the fear of seeing their children taken away, internees were subjected to mistreatment by guards. Punishments were common and included confinement with nothing but bread and water for several days. Guards also beat detainees. We learned about some of these cases because nomads wrote to the prefect denouncing the abuse they suffered. For example, at Coudrecieux camp (Sarthe) two guards "violently hit the nomad Michelet Joseph, after the latter was rendered immobile by handcuffs"⁵⁹ and a guard had a woman

⁵³ DA Loire-Atlantique, 43 W 152 (21 January, 1941) Report from the director of the La Forge's internment camp for nomads, Moidson-la-Rivière.

⁵⁴ DA Loire-Atlantique, 1694 W 34 (15 June, 1943) Letter from the inhabitants of La Morinière to the Prefect of Loire-Inférieure.

⁵⁵ DA Charente, 9 W 4 (20 June, 1942) Note from the department of family assistance (Charente's Prefecture) to the director of the Alliers's internment camp.

⁵⁶ DA Charente, 1 W 126 (26 April, 1945) Enquiry regarding the charity "La Mère des Pauvres", run by Father Le Bideau.

⁵⁷ Filhol and Hubert, *Les Tsiganes*, 236.

⁵⁸ DA Loiret, 175 W 34106. Individual file of the internees of the Jargeau's camp.

⁵⁹ DA Sarthe, 653 W 59 (1 August, 1941) Letter from the Republic's Prosecutor of Le Mans to the Prefect of Sarthe.



run alongside his bicycle until total exhaustion.⁶⁰ These abuses were sometimes approved by the administration, which considered that nomads deserved punishment, especially if they tried to escape.

The Germans

As mentioned above, nomads, in both internment camps and compulsory residence, were confronted by the French administration and not by German occupiers. The decrees ordering their compulsory residence and internment were carried out by the French. The Germans were no less an enemy, but they were an abstract one, distant, and, in many cases, almost invisible. In fact, the correspondence between the camp chiefs and the prefects reveals the underhand action of the *Feldkommandanturs* (field commanders). These relationships were complex because the French and German administrations did not act in the same way: some decisions taken by one were contested by the other. Surprisingly perhaps, when it comes to nomads, it was not uncommon for the French administration to be more severe and repressive than the German one.

The administrative divisional archives of Charente offer us a rather surprising example of disagreements between the French and German administrations concerning the treatment of nomads. On December 12, 1940, the medical doctor of the *Feldkommandantur* of Angoulême, after a visit to the Alliers camp, wrote a report in which he pointed out “major defects in the accommodation and supplies for nomads”.⁶¹ He wrote that “the nomads were lying with their own insufficient clothes and blankets on wet and dirty ground” and that the “provisions were absolutely insufficient”. He concluded that “a radical change” would have to occur in the sanitary conditions of the camp due to the risk of “constituting a danger of contagion for the civilian populations living near the camp”.⁶² The *Feldkommandantur* took the doctor’s report seriously and the very next day the German colonel sent an “urgent” note to the prefect of Angoulême regarding “conditions of life contrary to human dignity at the concentration camp of the nomads”.⁶³ He underlined the “scandalous situation” of the Alliers camp and ordered immediate changes while warning that a new inspection would take place shortly.

What emerged from examination of the twenty-two administrative divisional archives is that the prefectures and gendarmeries took advantage of the exceptional period of the occupation of France to intensify the severity of their treatment of nomads. While French Resistance was defined as all action taken against German occupiers, the resistance of the nomads went further and acted both in resistance to the Germans, as well as in resistance to

⁶⁰ DA Sarthe, 653 W 59 (4 June, 1941) Letter from the *Feldkommandantur* 755 to the Prefect of Sarthe.

⁶¹ DA Charente, 1 W 41 (12 December, 1940) Report from the doctor of the *Feldkommandantur*.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ DA Charente, 1 W 41 (13 December, 1940) Letter from the Commandant of the *Feldkommandantur* to the Prefect of Charente.



French authorities responsible for the application of internment and compulsory residence orders. The double dimension of this resistance could well explain the lack of official recognition of nomadic resistance after the war. Recognizing their fight against the German occupation would have led to the revelation of their acts of resistance against the French authorities as well, both during and before the war, and thus question the politics of the Third Republic.

The difficulty of analysing these resistance activities is illustrated quite well by the following anecdote. A group of nomads, musicians by profession, were allowed to go and play in the cafes and restaurants of Angoulême until a certain hour. One evening in May 1941, police surprised seven nomads from the Alliers camp playing music in a restaurant after the authorized time. When the police entered the establishment to interrupt the music and ask the nomads for their passes, a German in civilian clothes, accompanied by German soldiers, prevented them from doing so. The report of the police describes the scene thus: “one of the civilians [...] violently wrung a nomadic identity card from his hands. Then he showed us the door telling us that this is not our concern”. The report ends with the following consideration: the nomads “expressed joy at seeing us being put out the door”.⁶⁴ It should be added that the archives of the Alliers camp reveal that these seven nomads were punished on their return to the camp and spent several days in a cell with only bread and water. For the nomads, the most immediate threat was thus represented by French officials, who applied legislation concerning the nomads with varying degrees of zeal.

4. Different forms of resistance

Uses of false identities

In a previous study, we showed that some Roma groups, especially the so-called Hungarian Roma, applied certain resistance strategies in an attempt to escape the control of the administration of the Third Republic.⁶⁵ These strategies, as detailed in the police and journalistic archives of the early twentieth century, included the use of false identities. Indeed, the most direct way of diverting regular identity checks was to have multiple identities: one would change his lineage, his place of birth, his first names and last names. These strategies allowed many Roma family groups to preserve certain family ties, travelling habits, and lifestyle practices.

This form of resistance continued in the 1940s. In November 1940, when the Sabas family was subjected to compulsory residence in a building in Le Croisic (Loire-Inférieure) with other families who had fled Paris, the police station of Saint-Nazaire began to keep files

⁶⁴ DA Charente, 1 W 41 (5 May, 1941) Note from the policemen to the director of the Alliers' camp.

⁶⁵ Lise Foisneau, “La crainte des Roms. Pratique romanès de la défiance,” *Tracés*, no. 31 (2016): 87-108.

on everyone. The file reveals that these families of so-called “Hungarian” Roma had completely disguised their lineage and their places of birth so as not to be confused with French nomads. Rose Sabas said she was born in May 1899 in Toulon, child of Georges Sabas and Marie Charchouclaux and she travelled mostly in Spain with her late husband.⁶⁶ To claim that one is born in a big city makes it more difficult for the administration to find records of their civil status. In addition, the names of Rose’s parents did not allow the administration to assign her to a known nomad family group. “Charchouclaux” is the name of Roma dish: Sour cabbage, *šax šuklo*. This process of concealing identity allowed the Sabas family to travel between France and Spain and obtain new identity documents every time they travelled around France.

The use of false identities also allowed some nomads to escape conscription at the beginning of the war. In 1942, a warrant for the arrest of a Eugene Michelet for insubordination was issued by the Toulouse Military Investigating Judge. Eugene’s family was assigned to Bourgneuf in the Creuse. During a check in July 1942, as three gendarmes approached the camp, the following scene occurred: “At the moment we arrived at the last trailer, a man we recognized as the nomad Theodore Michelet rushed out and fled in the direction of the city”.⁶⁷ A chase ensued, that ended without the man in question being caught. The gendarmes concluded that Eugene Michelet was hiding under the name of Theodore. But Theodore Michelet in fact existed: Eugene and Theodore were brothers. After an arrest warrant was drawn up in the name of Eugene, he had the prefecture of Montlucon deliver identity documents in the name of his brother, Theodore, early in 1942. The discovery of this trick earned Eugene three years of detention at Mauzac, a military prison camp in Dordogne.⁶⁸

One of the most significant cases of false identities, which made headlines in the press, concerned the Demeters in the administrative division of the Loire from October 1942 to January 1943. Following a theft of gold coins and banknotes (the archives do not give any details on this), a section of the judicial police of Saint-Etienne was responsible for conducting an investigation into this “tribe”. During simultaneous searches, the police found many identity cards: “Among the many identity cards found were false identity certificates, ration cards that were erased and falsified, Spanish passports for nomads named Suffert and Arneras-Sarguero.”⁶⁹ The report notes that the latter managed to obtain identity documents “from the authorities in the four different places of France, including Toulouse, Marseille, Colmar, and Clermont-Ferrand”. However, the police were not sure exactly why the Demeters had so many different identities. They assumed that these identities made it possible to evade laws on military recruitment, “to take advantage of benefits granted to large families”

⁶⁶ DA Loire-Atlantique, 2 Z 141. Nomad identity document of Rose Sabas.

⁶⁷ DA Creuse, 987 W 52 (22 July, 1942) Report giving information of the abandonment of assigned residency by the nomad Théodore Michelet.

⁶⁸ DA Creuse, 987 W 52 (25 May, 1943) Note by the Commandant of Bourgneuf’s brigade on the nomad Eugène Michelet.

⁶⁹ DA Loire, 195 W 2 (9 January, 1943) Letter from the Prefect of Loire to the delegate prefect of Rhône.



and to escape “expulsion orders” to which some of them were subjected.⁷⁰ After several days of trial, the court still did not know for certain if these people were named Demeter, Romano, Suffert, Martinez, Pascual, Fernandez or Arneras-Sarguero; it did not also become clear whether these people were French or Spanish. More than fifteen members of these families were sentenced to several months in jail for “the use of false ration cards”, “use of false passports”, “false notarial acts”, and “falsification of identity”.⁷¹ The rest of the family were under compulsory residence order in a commune of the Rhône. The trial and the convictions would not prevent these family groups from disappearing without trace in August 1943. The archives do not provide information allowing us to trace them during the last years of the war. However, we know that one of these young men, Antonio Fernandez, lost his life in a battle between the *maquis* and the Germans.⁷²

Circumventing the law by finding loopholes

Using false identities was not the only way nomads attempted to circumvent the legislation. They also tried to negotiate their way out of the repressive measures or try to find loopholes in the law. For instance, in May 1940, a member of another Demeter family group, in compulsory residence in Loire-Inférieure, would try to negotiate the transfer of his family to the free zone. Serge Demeter managed to have the sub-prefect of Châteaubriant (Loire-Inférieure) write a letter to the prefect of Bouches-du-Rhône in which the former recounts the conclusions of the negotiation with Serge Demeter: if the prefect of Bouches-du-Rhône would agree to receive the Demeters, they pledge to renounce all state allowances and commit to finding housing through their own means.⁷³

Negotiations were not always conducted outright. Most nomad family groups would learn to work around the legislation, exactly as they had already done under the Third Republic. The simplest means of avoiding internment was to own land. If the nomads were landowners, the Vichy State preferred to assign them to their homes instead of interning them. Thus, many families of nomads would acquire or rent plots of land starting in 1939.⁷⁴ For example, Nicolas Winterstein and Amélie Dessagne rented a house in Saint-Hilaire-de-Vouste (Vendée) in September 1943 to avoid being transferred to a nomad camp.⁷⁵ Unfortunately, the administration deemed land rental to be insufficient and arrested them, and transferred

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² DA Lot, 1341 W 2 (6 October, 1945) Report regarding the authorization request for travel asked by the Amador tribe from Bagnac.

⁷³ DA Loire-Atlantique, 2 Z 140 (1 May, 1940) Letter for the Prefect of Bouches-du-Rhône.

⁷⁴ For more details on this point, see Jacques Sigot, *Des barbelés que découvre l'histoire. Un camp pour les Tsiganes... et les autres* (Bordeaux: Wallada, 2011).

⁷⁵ DA Vendée, 20 W 546 (2 September, 1943) Report on the arrest of Dessagne Amélie, wife of Winterstein, nomad.

them to a camp. Thomas Demestre bought a small property in Cellefroidin in the Charente, but he and his family were also interned at the Poitiers camp.⁷⁶

Another strategy for taking advantage of loopholes in existing legislation was to enter into a marriage. Just as the fact of being a landowner was supposed to allow for a dispensation from internment, marriage would allow a couple to remain together during internment or compulsory residence. It should be noted that the majority of couples in the nomad category were not married according to civil law. For example, the so-called “Hungarian” Roma groups would be married in a Roma fashion, that is to say before the Roma community, but never in front of the Mayor or the parish priest. The problem for these cohabiting couples was that the French state did not recognize their union. To avoid being separated, many couples would get married at the town hall: for example, Chinca Demestre married Rosa Carlos on May 22, 1940 in Pontivy. Some researchers have seen marriages in the camps as a way to have a celebration in spite of their situation, however this was not the case. It was rather a strategy of resistance to prevent family separations.

Anonymous letters and denunciation of abuse

Whilst using false identities and finding loopholes in the law were modes of resistance that go back to the Third Republic, the nomads also used new means to try to challenge the application of the law. The internees of the nomad camps were well aware of the hierarchy of administrations and could therefore sometimes navigate within them. For instance, in August 1941, Mr. Martin, a nomad imprisoned at the Coudrecieux camp wrote a letter to the Attorney General in Angers denouncing the ill-treatment of nomads, particularly by a certain camp guard. The prosecutor then wrote a letter to the delegate of the Ministry of the Interior, to inform him of Mr. Martin’s complaint. The delegate wrote in turn to the prefect of Maine-and-Loire (even though the Coudrecieux camp was in the Sarthe): “The existence of this camp never having been reported to me, I request you inform me of the conditions under which it was created and is currently functioning”.⁷⁷ In the response it was revealed that the department of the Sarthe had set up a camp several months previously that included more than 300 nomads. A woman internee in the Moidson-la-Rivière camp in the Loire-Inférieure wrote anonymously to the prefect of the administrative division to complain about living conditions in the camp.

Forges, January 14, 1941

Mr. Prefect,

I do not know whether you are aware of the life we are experiencing in this camp, in terms of the manual labour that we endure by force majeure and especially the very little food we have,

⁷⁶ DA Vienne, 109 W 55 (4 July, 1944) Report on the arrest of Boboco Demestre’s nomad family.

⁷⁷ DA Sarthe, 653 W 59, August 30, 1941. Letter from Mr. Martin, nomad, internee at the Coudrecieux camp, to the General Prosecutor of Angers.



without heating; sometimes two days, three days without drinking, so that our physical forces and our moral forces begin to abandon us. I do not see why in this camp of Moisdon-la-Rivière, we do not have the same regime as the neighbouring administrative divisions: Sarthe, Vienne and Mayenne. We have nothing left to wear and we have our men who ask us for many things and we have no money to send them.⁷⁸

On receipt of this letter, the prefect wrote to the camp chief at Moisdon asking for details of the anonymous complaint he received. Without reading too much into these documents, the camp leader in his response appears deeply upset by this prisoner who exceeded his authority by speaking directly to his supervisor. He justifies himself to the prefect, saying that “if an investigation were carried out, it would certainly lead to the observation that more than 90 per cent of the internees are beginning to be satisfied with their situation ... and would not want to go wander on the roads anymore.”⁷⁹ In addition, he identifies the author of the letter who, according to him, is “one of the worst individuals in the camp”, “an accomplished type of bitch and drunkard”, she is “hated by all her peers, from whom she has already had to be protected.” The camp commander also takes the opportunity to inform the prefect that it is not impossible that the prefect or the “occupying authorities” will receive in the coming days another letter of this type: “Jean Pougin wrote to the German authorities through the named Sauton (Pougin was illiterate) to denounce the ‘atrocities’ of which the nomads of Moisdon are victim.”⁸⁰

Indeed, internees did not hesitate to write directly to the German administration to complain about treatment reserved for them by the French administration. For instance, in the spring of 1941, André Legouas, interned at the Coudrecieux camp, wrote to the *Feldkommandantur* to denounce the poor living conditions in the camp. We have no record of exchanges between the *Feldkommandantur* and the prefect of Sarthe, but we found a letter from the prefect of Sarthe, in which he expresses his strong dissatisfaction to the camp commander of Coudrecieux. He asks that nomads who bypass the administration be “punished disciplinarily.”⁸¹

Expressing discontent: Act of protest, insults, unrest, disturbances and riots

The archives of the camps that we uncovered have revealed that internees also engaged in more direct resistance acts, ranging from insult to insurrection.

⁷⁸ DA Loire-Atlantique, 43 W 152 (14 January, 1941) Anonymous letter from an internee to the Prefect of Loire-Inférieure.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ DA Sarthe, 653 W 57 (24 June, 1941) Letter from the Prefect of Sarthe to the director of the Coudrecieux camp.

The Adam family was interned in the Kérangal street camp in Rennes at the beginning of 1942. The “head of the family” was a woman: Rosa Wiss, a widow aged 41 years old, she was accompanied by her thirteen children, aged from 1 to 23 years old. According to archival documents, on 3 March, 1942 the family “expressed their discontent about turning off the lights in the camp at 9 pm”.⁸² The elders of the family attacked staff switching off lights, and the guards on duty “had to intervene to restore order”. They restored the lighting to try to find the culprits of this ruckus. One of the Adam sons then pulled the lead out of a socket to plunge the camp back into darkness. Internees then took advantage of this to insult the guards. Several offenses of contempt against a law enforcement officer were reported. The day after the event, the director of the camp asked that the Adam family, who, according to him, were responsible for the troubles of the previous day, be transferred to a camp with disciplinary premises available. The Adam family were transferred to the camp of Moidson-la-Rivière and the Prefect of the Loire-Inférieure explicitly asked the director of the camp “to tame their wild character”.⁸³

The gendarmes who guarded the camps were sometimes overwhelmed by the behaviour of some internees expressing discontent. In September 1943, the director of the Alliers camp (Charente) asked the prefect that the Demestre family be transferred to the camp of Poitiers, known for being more “severe”. Interned at the camp of Alliers in November 1940, this family was allowed to leave the camp in August 1941 to reach a place of compulsory residence. As a result of complaints of “begging, theft and theft of ration cards”⁸⁴, the Demestres were interned again in February 1942, but escaped from the camp three times between 4 April and 5 May, 1942. In September 1943, 8 men, 7 women and 16 children from this family were arrested and returned to the Alliers camp. One of the reports of a gendarme of the camp explains that, upon their return, the Demestres “sought to make the nomads revolt”⁸⁵ and to provoke incidents with the personnel of the camp. In another report, it was written that “this family was defiant” and that the camp director took “severe measures [...] against heads of families” and that they were “locked up in disciplinary premises”.⁸⁶ To get these men out of the cells, a doctor intervened by writing medical certificates attesting to the fact that the disciplinary cells may have dramatic consequences on the health of some of these men.⁸⁷ The Demestre family was transferred to the Poitiers camp in November 1943.

On 21 March, 1941, at the Choisel camp (Loire-Inférieure), 20-year-old Angèle Siegler was queuing for the ration of sugar to which she was entitled for her infant. When her turn came

⁸² DA Ille-et-Vilaine, 4 M 150 (4 March, 1942) Letter from the director of the internment camp for nomads (Rennes) to the Prefect of Ille-et-Vilaine.

⁸³ DA Loire-Atlantique, 1694 W 34 (26 March, 1942) Letter from the Prefect of Loire-Inférieure to the Prefect of Ille-et-Vilaine.

⁸⁴ DA Charente, 9 W 4 (28 February, 1943) Note from the director of the Alliers’ camp to the Prefect of Charente.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ DA Charente, 9 W 1 (30 October, 1943) Note on the Alliers’ camp.

⁸⁷ DA Charente, 9 W 4 (29 September, 1943) Boboco Demestre’s medical certificate.



and she saw the amount of sugar she was given, she preferred to throw it on the floor rather than agree to such a paltry amount. Accounts diverge as for what happened next: The gendarmes said they were insulted and beaten by Angèle and that she “tried, with some success, to convince other internees to revolt”.⁸⁸ They claim to have been forced to incarcerate her in a cell because of “these calls to revolution”. Angèle Siegler is said to have uttered the following: “You are a band of idlers, you have rotten blood, you cows, we will make a revolution in the camp and I do not care if I am sentenced to ten years in prison.”⁸⁹ The gendarmes and the camp commander then decided to file a complaint against her for “verbal assault and rebellion, insults to officials in their service and incitement of prisoners to revolt.”⁹⁰ During her first appearance in court, Angèle presented her version of the facts:

I do not recognize the facts that are presented against me. I did not insult any gendarme. They were the ones who jumped on me, six of them together, when I had my baby in my arms and hit me, because I was asking them for a piece of sugar for my little girl. I refused to take the little sugar that the nurse gave me and I threw it on the floor. I did not insult the captain of the camp either. He insulted me and slapped me because I told him that he was not allowed to hit me.⁹¹

Despite her defense, Angèle Siegler was sentenced to one month in prison.

Another particularly illustrative example is that of the Laurot family, interned at the camp of Coudrecieux (Sarthe). The camp management monitored this family very closely because, according to them, “before the arrival of the Laurot families at the camp, there were from time to time a few hiccups between warders and internees”, but since their internment, management has received “demands of all kinds.”⁹² The deputy director of the camp suspected the Laurots of creating “propaganda [...] to inspire the internees to rebel”. In September 1941, the Laurots were arbitrarily deprived of the right to “go out for the collection of wood.” This decision led to a collective protest against the supervisors. Insults were exchanged and one of the guards heard one of the Laurots saying: “When we get out of here, if we find guards on our road, we will beat them up. Camp life is untenable, we will rebel.”⁹³ Several guards seized Eugène Laurot, 24, who was perceived as the leader of this protest action. In the report which traces the events from the testimonies, Eugène Laurot did not try to justify his actions and said that “[he] admits to having said to the sous-chef of camp [...] that he was a “bastard and a coward”⁹⁴ and that if he resisted the guards it was because he knew he would be hit by those same guards.

⁸⁸ DA Loire-Atlantique, 43 W 152 (March, 1941) Monthly report on the Choisel camp.

⁸⁹ DA Loire Atlantique, châ 136 (1941) File on Angèle Siegler.

⁹⁰ DA Loire-Atlantique, 43 W 152 (March, 1941) Monthly report on the Choisel camp.

⁹¹ DA Loire-Atlantique, châ 136 (1941) File on Angèle Siegler.

⁹² DA Sarthe, 653 W 59 (18 September, 1941) Report regarding administrative information: Laurot's case [*Affaire Laurot*].

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

There were physical fights between individual internees and the French guards of the camps. For instance, Gabrielle Vichy did not hesitate to knock out the guard who accompanied her to run an errand in the village, in order to escape⁹⁵, just like a man named Lagrain, who promised to “punch two or three guards before running away from here [the camp of Coudrecieux]”.⁹⁶ However, these individual actions were immediately put down by camp personnel, who locked these individuals up in detention rooms.

However, these mutinous acts of protest and disturbing behaviour would become more violent and individuals more determined after long months of internment. For instance, the internees of the camp of Coudrecieux (Sarthe) were transferred in mid-April 1942 to the camp of Mulsanne. (We did not find oral testimonies of the episode we describe, instead it was made possible by the camp’s administrative documents, including daily reports.) Shortly before noon on Monday, 12 May, 1942, the internees protested against the fact that the food was insufficient. Some internees forced down one of the gates of the camp—the one near the guardhouse. The internees rushed to exit. The guards called for reinforcements and the soldiers of the Mulsanne gendarmerie station intervened to restore order.⁹⁷ The director of the camp immediately informed the prefect of what he called a “riot” and asked him to find an “urgent solution” to the question of food, because, he said, “other troubles are to be feared.”⁹⁸ And, indeed, the very next day, the violence continued around 1 pm. Internees, presumably very determined, again knocked down the gate of the guard post, then reached the entrance gate of the camp that they also levelled. Once out of the camp, the internees threatened to “walk on to the village of Mulsanne”.⁹⁹ On the pretext that the camp personnel were not armed, the management called the *Feldkommandantur* who sent about twenty *Feldgendarmen* to restore order. The report says that, rapidly, “calm was returned”.¹⁰⁰ The administrative divisional archives of the Sarthe did not have other documents concerning this riot, and nor did we find a witness to the incident. However, it can be assumed that the internees were well organized, in order to come together to knock down the entrance gate of the camp. Contrary to police documents suggesting that this was a spontaneous action related to a simple food issue, we believe—in light of how revolts started in other camps—this was rather a riot organized to try to increase the power of the internees and escape the internment regime of the French State.

Although we did not collect direct testimony from actors who participated in such events, archival documents revealed that some internees had probably fomented plans for much larger revolts and also armed themselves. For instance, when, on 21 March, 1941, Angèle Siegler was arrested for insulting guards and inciting detainees to revolt at the Choisel

⁹⁵ DA Sarthe, 653 W 57 (20 December, 1941) Note from the supervisor in chief to the head of the 2nd Division of Le Mans.

⁹⁶ DA Sarthe, 653 W 57 (8 July, 1941) Note from the supervisor in chief to the Prefect of Sarthe.

⁹⁷ DA Sarthe, 653 W 59 (12 May, 1942) Report on the camp.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ DA Sarthe, 653 W 59 (13 May, 1942) Report on the camp.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.



(Loire-Inférieure) camp, she was interrogated by gendarmes threatening her, and she claimed to have been hit. Following her interrogation, a search was organized in the camp: Angèle Siegler, undoubtedly under pressure, revealed that several camp internees were hiding weapons. The director of the Choisel camp wrote that it was because she thought she was “able to have clemency” if she betrayed her fellow prisoners.¹⁰¹ Angèle Siegler knew who had weapons and where the weapons were hidden in the camp. The camp staff then discovered three hunting rifles, another rifle and a revolver. The owners of the weapons were handed over to the German authorities, who also searched the barracks, trailers and the internees themselves. The four bearers of arms were taken by the Germans and brought before the German Military Tribunal. They were Alphonse Evin, 33, Jean Pougin, 33, known for his communist activities, Ernest Pougin and Voscho Demestre, 44 years old. The director of the camp noted, that “the confiscated weapons were not concealed in order to make use of them against the Germans, but against the guards and administrative staff of the camp”.¹⁰² Shortly after the departure of the four men, a gendarme noted “certain disturbances in the camp”¹⁰³ and informed his superiors that a “fight” broke out in the evening between “two clans”. The main antagonists were “a Siegler woman” and “a Schmitt”. It can be assumed that the internees turned against the family of Angèle Siegler, who was responsible for the discovery of the weapons. After this incident, the director of the camp remained convinced that other weapons were still hidden in the camp. He informed the sub-prefect that “new, more dangerous weapons could be brought into the camp either by visitors, in packages addressed to internees, or by internees themselves”¹⁰⁴ and asked that visits and exits be stopped. The German Military Tribunal sentenced the four gun holders to four months in prison. This event illustrates, not only were nomads in the camps organized, but also that the camp administration was aware of it and took steps to pre-empt collective resistance actions.

Escape attempts

This scale of organization among nomads interned in the camps is also evident when one studies various escape attempts. There were numerous cases of nomads escaping from internment camps. Joseph Valet noted that it would be possible to write a great deal on escapes, “since oral testimonies and newspaper articles testify to the number of times Gypsies succeeded in escaping [their camps]”.¹⁰⁵ For example, 66% of the nomads (884 out of 1334)

¹⁰¹ DA Loire-Atlantique, 43 W 152 (May, 1941) Monthly report on the Choisel camp.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ DA Loire-Atlantique, 2 Z 140 (26 March, 1941) Report from the commandant of gendarmerie.

¹⁰⁴ DA Loire-Atlantique, 43 W 152 (22 March, 1941) Report from the director of the Choisel camp to the Sub-Prefect of Châteaubriant.

¹⁰⁵ Joseph Valet, “Gitans et Voyageurs d’Auvergne durant la guerre 1939-45,” *Études tsiganes*, no. 6 (1995): 211-219.

in the Rivesaltes' camp escaped at least once.¹⁰⁶ Thus specific devices to prevent recidivists from escaping would be set up in France: These people would be isolated in so-called “disciplinary” camps. Systematic escape attempts seem to suggest that interned nomads organized themselves in a network, including some people also outside the camp to aid their escapes.

Escaping as a family

When we consult the records from the different French internment camps for nomads, we realize that escape attempts were regular and that, unlike escapes from prison camps, they were often accomplished as a family. Internees escaped most often in a group, with their spouse, their parents and their children. It was not uncommon that, in one night, about twenty people making up a family group would try to escape. At the Poitiers camp, on the night of 9 to 10 September, 1941, Jean Reinhard, 31, and Frédéric Reinhard, both 21, accompanied by ten members of their family, tried to escape by climbing over the fence, without cutting the barbed wire. They were arrested by the German authorities, as they crossed the demarcation line illegally.¹⁰⁷ The German authorities refrained from bringing them before a court but demanded a sanction as deterrence.

As already mentioned, thirty members of the Demestre family escaped from the camp of Alliers (Charente) on three separate occasions. Only after six months were some of them caught by gendarmes. When these same Demestres were transferred to the camp of Montreuil-Bellay (Maine-and-Loire), they continued to try and escape. A failed attempt took place during bombings on the night of 3 to 4 July, 1944. The next day, 34 members of the Demestre family were caught by gendarmes. Betini Demestre explained to the gendarmes that during the bombings, he crossed “the barbed wire that [he] flattened while climbing on it” and once outside, he took out his wife, his six children and “all the other members [of his family]”.¹⁰⁸ Their intention was to go to their father who owned a property in Charente in order to “save [their] children from death”.¹⁰⁹

The monthly reports of the Alliers camp mentions censored letters or telegrams in which the senders asked the internees to escape to join family members.¹¹⁰ For example, some people escaped from one camp to another camp where relatives were interned. The Reinhard children, in forced custody at Le Bideau, escaped to join their parents at the interned camp of Alliers.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁶ Alexandre Doulot, *Les Tsiganes au camp de Rivesaltes 1941-1942* (Paris: Lienart, 2015), 5.

¹⁰⁷ DA Vienne, 109 W 43 (1 September, 1941) Letter from the director of the Poitiers camp to the Prefect of Vienne.

¹⁰⁸ DA Vienne, 109 W 55 (4 July, 1944) Report regarding the arrest of a nomad's family.

¹⁰⁹ DA Vienne, 109 W 55 (4 July, 1944) Report regarding the arrest of Charles Demestre's family, escapee from the Montreuil-Bellay's camp.

¹¹⁰ DA Charente, 9 W 1 (July/August, 1946) Report on the Alliers' camp.

¹¹¹ DA Charente, 9 W 4 (26 November, 1945) Letter from the director of the camp of the Alliers to the Prefect of Charente.



These family escapes, or those made to join family members interned elsewhere, show that the important thing was to stay together and not allow the system to break down family ties.

Individual escapes

Individual escape was sometimes a family strategy. Raymond Gurême wrote that his parents had decided that their children should escape one at a time: the family organized themselves, and first their daughter, Henriette, escaped with two of her friends. Raymond Gurême accompanied them to the garages until it was possible to escape and let them go. Only a few days later, he escaped with his brother. He says that the day after the escape of his sister, the director of the camp of Darnétal “blamed everything on a gendarme” and “claimed that this gendarme let the girls out”. Raymond Gurême, who organized the escape of his sister, concluded, that “the archives can ‘lie’ when the people who write them have a particular interest”.¹¹²

While some escape attempts were organized as part of a collective decision to escape, it did not prevent other internees from taking advantage of all opportunities to escape. On 11 May, 1942, 17-year-old André Adam, interned at the Choisel camp, took advantage of a chore in the woods to ask “permission to answer ‘nature’s call’” and thus escape.¹¹³ Spontaneous escape was not only carried out by young people: Paolo Demestre, born in 1885, escaped alone from the camp of Coudrecieux (Sarthe) in March 1944. The authorities of the prefecture only became aware of his disappearance two months later when the nomads were transferred from this camp to the Montreuil-Bellay camp.¹¹⁴ In some camps, escape attempts were so regular that the authorities put forward the idea that the camps should be guarded at night “by the nomads themselves, under the constant control of the guardhouse, and the men responsible for surveillance of the various sectors would bear responsibility [for escapes]”.¹¹⁵ Some internees escaped from camps and then came back to see their children. According to the commander of the Angoulême Brigade, Louis Dupuis was an “incorrigible recidivist” who spent his time escaping and returning, since his four children were also in the Alliers camp.¹¹⁶ In May 1943, following one of his many escapes, Dupuis was finally punished: he was locked up for a period of fifteen days and then transferred to the Poitiers camp without his children.

Throughout the archives, profiles of men and women who were regularly involved in escape attempts emerged. Paul Schaenotz, born in 1883, was transferred to the Fort Barraux camp on 31 December, 1943.¹¹⁷ Widowed, he was arrested for the first time in 1941, taken to

¹¹² Gurême, *Interdit aux nomades*, 88.

¹¹³ DA Loire-Atlantique, 43 W 157 (12 May, 1942) Gendarmerie report on the escape of the nomad Adam André.

¹¹⁴ DA Sarthe, 653 W 57 (27 April, 1944) Letter from the Head of the police department to the Prefect of Sarthe.

¹¹⁵ DA Charente, 1 W 41 (17 May, 1941) Letter from the director of the camp of the Alliers to the Prefect of Charente.

¹¹⁶ DA Charente, 9 W 4 (14 May, 1943) Report written by the Adjuvant Courcelle, Commandant of the Angoulême brigade.

¹¹⁷ DA Isère, 15 W 222 and 17 W 136.

the Rivesaltes camp, transferred to the Barcarès camp and then to the Saliers camp, from which he escaped for the first time in August 1942. Returned to the camp, he escaped a second time in January 1943, then a third time in April 1943. He was then arrested six months later in Cantal and taken to Nexon's guarded residence centre, then transferred to Fort-Barraux in December 1943. Nomad men who escaped several internment camps and were suspected of political activities were sent to Fort Barraux in the Isère. Another example of a prisoner of Fort Barraux was Maurice Reinhart, born in 1892, whose wife was interned in the camp of Saliers. Following his escapes and his arrests, he was successively sent to the camps of Argelès, Rivesaltes, Saint Paul d'Eyjean, Saint Sulpice la Pointe, Noé, Nexon and Fort Barraux.

The escape attempts of nomads were taken very seriously by the various police services. On 30 December, 1942, François Hornberger, interned since the previous day at the camp of Saliers (Bouches-du-Rhône), succeeded in deceiving the watchmen and escaped during the night. A brigade was sent to find him: They searched the stations of Arles (Bouches-du-Rhône), as well as different cities of the Allier. On 2 January, 1942, at Commeny station (Allier) on an express train from Bordeaux, the brigade found François Hornberger who seemed to want to disembark in this city. The latter denied this and declared that he "had no intention of disembarking"; [he] was just looking for cigarette butts."¹¹⁸ He then tried to justify why he spent his last three days on various trains, from Arles to Saint-Christophe-en-Bazeille in the Indre, Saint-Etienne, Roanne and to Commeny. The proceedings say nothing more, but François Hornberger had to answer these questions before the prosecutor of Guéret court of justice. He was interned at the camp of Nexon (Charente), then sent to the Île of Ré to work on the fortifications.¹¹⁹

Escaping with help from people outside the camp

The last point about escapes that we must address is that of escapes accomplished with help from outside the camp. Victor Le Goff, interned at camp Coudrecieux, confessed in November 1941 that he fled three times in a row with the help of nomads from outside the camp who cut the barbed wire and later hid him in their trailer.¹²⁰ But this escape is far from being the most extraordinary.

On 11 June, 1944, the camp of Nexon (Haute-Vienne) was attacked by the *maquis* that allowed 53 internees to escape. The attack was likely planned and the internees had been informed, since some policemen had noted during their watch that, at 1:25 am, some internees "were dressed, with suitcases placed at the foot of their bed". When two armed individuals disarmed the police, the internees began shouting "Here is the *maquis*" and entered the

¹¹⁸ DA Creuse, 987 W 52 (1 January, 1943) Report regarding the arrest of the nomad François Hornberger escapee from the camp of Saliers.

¹¹⁹ Moreigne, "Les Nomades", 325.

¹²⁰ DA Sarthe, 653 W 57 (17 November, 1941) Note by the supervisor in chief to the director of the camp.



camp police station to collect their identity documents.¹²¹ Among the internees who left that evening with the *maquis* were Michel Lafleur, 23, Albert Martin, 24, and two nomads who evaded their obligation to attend the Obligatory Labour Service (*Services du Travail Obligatoire*, or *STO*) François Steimbach, 35, and Noël Meinhard, 31 years.

Helping others outside and inside the camps

Before turning to acts of resistance outside the internment camps, we would like to return to two testimonies that seem important to us. First of all, it should be noted that, as early as 1940, some families of nomads or “*forains*” who were not yet interned or were in compulsory residence sought to make life easier for internees who were not necessarily nomads. Jean-Luc Poueyto recalls the testimony of relatives of Coucou Doerr who, while residing in Oloron (Pyrénées-Atlantiques), “went very often to the internment camp of Gurs to feed the prisoners through the wire mesh and barbed wire”.¹²² The second story is that of Father Fleury. Authorized to enter the area reserved for the nomads of the Poitiers camp, Father Fleury benefited from the help of nomad internees to deliver information to Jewish internees. In his unpublished memoirs, *Le difficile devoir d’être un homme* (The Difficult Duty of Being a Man), he tells how he succeeded in entering the “Jewish camp” more than two hundred times:

I only want to express my gratitude to the Gypsies who encouraged my visit to this camp. I went more than two hundred times with the complicity of the nomads, always on the alert to tell me if the Germans were there, or to let me know, if I was already in the Jewish camp, that they had seen them arrive in the distance, through the barbed wire, on the vast bare plain. Immediately, I changed camps and took refuge among the Gypsies’ barracks where the Germans, throughout the war, never set foot, as they were afraid of catching lice or epidemics. [...] Also the bonds of friendship, already so solidly sealed with the Gypsies, took a turn of complicity, which one could call sacred, since by protecting me, they allowed me, without their direct recognition of the fact, to save many human lives.¹²³

Several years later, Jacques Sigot collected the testimony of one of the internees who helped Father Fleury: José-André Fernandez remembers keeping watch to see if there were no guards while he was crossing the barbed wire.¹²⁴

Turning now to archival testimonies of acts outside the camps, we discover that as early as 1941 some nomads were helping others. In August 1941, Michel Reinhard, Philippe

¹²¹ DA Haute-Vienne, 185 W 3/67 (14 June, 1944) Letter from the National Police Inspector within the Nexon’s camp to the director of Nexon camp.

¹²² Jean-Luc Poueyto, *Manouches et mondes de l’écrit* (Paris: Karthala, 2011), 50.

¹²³ DA Vienne, Archives of Father Fleury. 82 J 1, Autograph manuscript. *Le Difficile devoir d’être un homme*.

¹²⁴ DA Vienne, Archives of Father Fleury. 82 J 8, *Le père Jean Fleury*. Alain de Survilliers.

Reinhard and Auguste Gimenez were interned at the Nexon Center for Undesirables for “trying to get foreigners over the border”.¹²⁵ Their lawyer explained that Auguste Gimenez met two Belgians in a café in Lourdes and, overhearing their conversation, he heard that these two foreigners wanted to cross the border to reach Spain. After a while, Auguste Gimenez suggested that he could take them to people who would be able to cross the border for a sum of money. Philippe and Michel Reinhard went to an appointment with the Belgians, but the police report does not say what their alleged role was. Unfortunately, one of the Belgians confided in the secretary of the Director of the Belgian Office who denounced their plan to the authorities. The lawyer for the three men argued that his clients were “unable to organize any border crossing” and “unable to have any political opinion”.¹²⁶ He also tried to argue that Michel Reinhard, born in 1890, did his military service in Pau, that six of his brothers fought in World War I and some in World War II, and that one of them, holder of the Croix de Guerre and the Military Medal, died in combat in 1916. However, the report from the gendarmerie, stamped “Secret”, explained that other arrests would take place, in particular that of a fourth individual associated with the three others who was at the time of the arrest with his accomplices in Spain “presumably for the same reason.”¹²⁷ The report says that it is “a real organization based in Lourdes” and that it is necessary to intern these people immediately so that they would not have time to transmit information.

Joining the Resistance

In June 1944, Raymond Gurême joined a French Forces of the Interior group which “acted in the sector Porte de la Chapelle, Saint-Denis, Enghien, Pontoise and Argenteuil.”¹²⁸ He wrote that he wanted to join the Resistance “because I felt that I had not fought enough.”¹²⁹ The testimony of Raymond Gurême is all the more valuable as he is the only one to clearly state the reasons for his commitment. For the others, whom we have encountered indirectly during archival research, often through the testimonies of their comrades, we do not have a direct source allowing us to precisely pinpoint their motivations. Without doubt they fought to preserve their lives and those of their loved ones in the face of an ever more present threat of annihilation. However, it is more difficult to conclude that they did so with the patriotic feeling of attachment to a country where they had lived for centuries like other resistance fighters. Moreover, their actions were not officially recognised after the war. We must, therefore, rely on testimonies which show that the actions of so called Nomads have not been forgotten by all.

¹²⁵ DA Hautes-Pyrénées, 20 W 27, File “Reinhard/Gimenez”.

¹²⁶ DA Hautes-Pyrénées, 20 W 27 (13 August, 1941) Letter from the lawyer Lhez to the Prefect of Hautes-Pyrénées.

¹²⁷ DA Hautes-Pyrénées, 20 W 27 (6 August, 1941) Gendarmerie Report on the discovery of an organization of border crossing.

¹²⁸ Gurême, *Interdit aux nomades*, 150.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 149.



On 20 September, 2003, René Castille, member of the Resistance in the Creuse, spoke of a “Gypsy” fighter in a speech during the laying of a plaque in memory of two members of the Resistance. Describing the story of the 1st *Compagnie Franche*, led by Captain Louis Herry, who participated in the liberation of the Creuse, he says:

The 1st Company Franche, like others but perhaps more than others, amalgamated volunteer fighters of all origins, Creusois and non-Creusois, French and Foreigners, including a Gypsy, and those of all denominations, Christians, Jews and atheists, those who believed in heaven and those who did not believe in it, all in love with the same idea of freedom.¹³⁰

In the *maquis*

Being called in to Obligatory Labour Service (*Services du Travail Obligatoire*, or *STO*) was one of the reasons why nomads joined the Resistance movement (*maquis*). We have seen in some administrative divisions that a majority of nomads called up for the *STO* evaded the work service. This discovery corroborates the account of Joseph Valet who writes, in an article on Travellers in Auvergne during the Second World War, that his investigation revealed that very few nomads “went away on their own” and that “most of them hid”.¹³¹ Of the 15 nomads called into the *STO* in the month of 1943, in the administrative division of Creuse, ten would evade this obligation and some (we do not have the exact figure) would be deemed unfit for the service.¹³²

The refusal to leave and travel to Germany was very strong, including in the internment camps. When the Germans came to the Poitiers camp on 21 May, 1942 to establish the list of Jewish and nomad internees who would leave with, a German organization using forced labour, Albert and Henri Reinhard burned themselves to avoid forced labour, while Clovis Orioux defied the German authorities, clearly expressing his refusal to leave, which would earn him several days of confinement.¹³³ Those evading the *STO* under compulsory residence hid each time the gendarmes came to check their place of residence. Sometimes they were found in a field adjoining the camp or even in caravans. Thus, Baptiste Offmann, Joseph Winterstein and Michel Lafleur, in compulsory residence in different towns of the Creuse, would be interned at the Nexon camp as *STO* deserters where they would join other nomads interned for the same reason. Others preferred to flee: Paul Michelet left with his belongings according to his *STO* order but never arrived at his post¹³⁴; just like Christian

¹³⁰ DA Creuse, Fonds René Castille 147 J 40, Discours de René Castille, Champredon (1ère Cie Franche), (20 September, 2003), 14.

¹³¹ Joseph Valet, “Gitans et Voyageurs d’Auvergne durant la guerre 1939-45”, *Études tsiganes*, no. 6, (1995): 211-219.

¹³² DA Creuse, 41 W 25, Reports regarding the arrest of *STO* evaders.

¹³³ DA Vienne, 109 W 40, Lists of Jews and nomad internees in the camp of Poitiers.

¹³⁴ DA Creuse, 987 W 50 (2 October, 1943) Gendarmerie report on the search for Paul Michelet, nomad.

Fourman, who was supposed to have gone to work in Germany but never arrived, so the police continued to search his family's caravans.¹³⁵

A number of these young men would then join the *maquis* around their places of residence. Christian Fourman, for example, was very active in the area around Chambon sur Voueize (Creuse). This *maquis* took the name of the Stoquer battalion and was part of the North-East Creuse Battalion Group. Following the end of August 1944, the captain of this battalion asked for an award for heroic deeds to be presented to Private Christian Fourmann.¹³⁶ Joseph Valet also collected testimonies from nomads who joined the *maquis* or had their brothers do so. Jacob Horn recounted that his brother Joseph was taken by force to Germany, while his brother Nicolas joined the *maquis*: "We had no news, we thought he was dead. We went to the leader of the *maquis* to find out if he had heard from him: "Your brother is not with us, but he is with a group, and still alive."¹³⁷ Elie Hoffmann, meanwhile, assigned to Mérinchal (Creuse), tells Joseph Valet that he should have gone to the STO, but hid instead, and that this is how he joined the Resistance.¹³⁸

After the war, few men applied for certificate of recognition, and even fewer such applications were approved. In 1961, Henri Kling applied to the Office of Former Soldiers and War Victims (*Office National des Anciens Combattants et Victimes de Guerre, ONAC*) for recognition of his STO deserter status, but as he was slow to send the necessary documents his application was rejected.¹³⁹ Henri Kling also joined the *Maquis* in Bresse and participated in fights with the Loulou company from June to August 1944.¹⁴⁰ At the beginning of the war, his parents burned their caravans and rented a house to avoid internment. When Henri Kling was called up for the STO, his wife, Armande Schatz, was pregnant. The latter pretended to the gendarmes who came for Henry, that he had abandoned her and she did not know where he was.¹⁴¹ Rejection of recognition for Henri Kling did not prevent him from talking to his children about this period and going regularly to visit his non-travelling *maquis* companions when he started travelling again after the war.

¹³⁵ DA Creuse, 987 W 51 (21 November, 1943) Report on the assigned residency of the nomad Christian Fourmann.

¹³⁶ DA Creuse, 147 J 319, Fonds René Castille, Thanks to Christophe Moreigne who showed us this specific archive.

¹³⁷ Joseph Valet, "Gitans et Voyageurs d'Auvergne durant la guerre 1939-45," *Études tsiganes*, no. 6 (1995): 211-219.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ AD Côte d'Or, W 354 (2002) File Henri Kling.

¹⁴⁰ Henri Kling's diploma. Loulou Company (Saône-et-Loire) French Forces of the Interior, Personal collection of Marie-Madeleine Kling Riboteau.

¹⁴¹ Personal correspondence with Mrs. Marie-Madeleine Kling Riboteau, daughter-in-law of Henri Kling (September, 2017).



Getting organized

The STO thus forced certain family groups to organize themselves in order to hide and feed those avoiding obligatory work service, including ones that were not nomads. These crimes of solidarity were very harshly condemned. Eugène Reinhard was interned in Fort-Barraux for “having knowingly housed his cousin Frédéric Reinhardt [...] defaulter of the Obligatory Labour Service.”¹⁴²

One of the most remarkable examples we discovered of a network of those in compulsory residence was in the Lot Administrative division, near Cahors. Various families transmitted information, exchanged ration cards and hid young people (for political but also family reasons) with the help of a couple of *forains*. Louise Chevallier, born in 1870, and Eugene Segond, born in 1889, managed to escape compulsory residence by keeping their status of *forains* until 1945. This allowed them to move around in the administrative division without worry. In addition, the fact that they were older and that there were only two of them probably helped them avoid police suspicion. Louise and Eugene had a small house in Sauzet (Lot) and a trailer parked in another town in Saint-Cyprien (Lot), separated by 20 kilometres but sold some rags or rabbit pelts to justify their stay” in Lot.¹⁴³ In September 1945, gendarmes came to their home in Sauzet in connection with numerous thefts that had been committed in the canton: They wanted to check inside their house. Eugène and Louise, who thought the war was over, invited them inside to search their homes. The gendarmes described the place as “a storehouse of junk, rags, feathers and miscellaneous objects of all kinds and of more or less doubtful provenance”. They then discovered a ration card belonging to the nomad Marie Loustalot-Nestour who was not related to the couple and who was under compulsory residence order in Lot. The gendarmes attempted to determine what this ration card was doing at the home. With a sense of pride and without believing they would be punished, the couple confessed their role in hosting nomads or *forains* who needed to hide or move away from their compulsory residence. The gendarmes concluded their report by writing that Louise and Eugene served “as a liaison between the various tribes of nomads who were in compulsory residence in the administrative division.”¹⁴⁴ The gendarmes then sent the prefect a request to reclassify the couple as nomads, and to place them under compulsory residence order. In November 1945, Louise and Eugène lost their status as “*forains*” and were reclassified as nomads.

Without the testimony of the actors directly involved, it is difficult to identify in the archives those networks to which some nomads belonged. However, some documents do give information on these organizations. A note from the intelligence services in Limoges (May 1944) confirms that people were monitored due to their links with nomad groups. Leopold Marbois, a canvas merchant in Périgueux, housed Jewish people in his home in 1944 and

¹⁴² DA Isère, 17 W 132.

¹⁴³ DA Lot, 1341 W 9 (September, 1945) Report regarding the *forains* Eugène Segond and Louise Chevalier.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

his main collaborator in his shop was a “Jew expelled from Germany”.¹⁴⁵ He was known to the intelligence services for having travelled, during the Spanish Revolution, to the Spanish border in order to give weapons to “Spanish Gypsies”. The intelligence services note in May 1944 that Leopold Marbois and his collaborator “an especially Gaullist Jew” continued their trafficking, but perhaps in the opposite direction.

Indeed, we found more than ten proceedings in administrative divisional archives stating that nomads, in compulsory residence, were in possession of weapons. In May 1943, during a search of the camp of the Kwig family, assigned to residence in the town of Monflanquin (Lot-et-Garonne), gendarmes discovered two revolvers in good working order buried in the ground, as well as four chargers and cartridges, corresponding to the revolvers, in a trailer. François Kwig explained that he found them in the forest of Mont-de-Marsan (Landes) in June 1940 and that he never declared them. He claimed that he did not know he had to hand them over to the mayor’s office, but could not justify why these weapons were hidden in the ground. François Kwig appeared before the Agen Criminal Court, which then sent him to a special court.¹⁴⁶ Similarly, when the gendarmes searched the house of Ferdinand Debar in Estang (Lot-et-Garonne), they discovered a revolver hidden under the stairs. Ferdinand Debar explained that the weapon was already there when he moved into the house and claimed that the weapon was rusty. However, the gendarmes noted that the weapon was in working condition. Ferdinand Debar was also brought before Agen’s special court but was released on bail on account of his large family.¹⁴⁷

Testimony from nomads in the resistance shows that they were not simply in possession of firearms, but also that they made use of them. Tsigane Coussantien, confided to Father Valet that he had “shrapnel of a grenade in the leg”¹⁴⁸ from his time in the *maquis*. His family was under compulsory residency in the Creuse at Felletin: his father and his brothers worked in the forest to make charcoal. In April 1943, they clandestinely left their compulsory residence in the Creuse to go to Corrèze, in Tarnac, where a forest operator promised them work.¹⁴⁹ They were arrested on April 28, 1943 in Bugeat (Corrèze) by a patrol of the gendarmerie while they celebrated the baptism of one of their children with the Demestre family. The forest operator testified at their trial for abandonment of compulsory residence, and succeeded in having them released.¹⁵⁰ It was at this point that, according to Tsigane Coussantien, the *maquis* “mobilized all the men” of his family and that two of his brothers became involved.¹⁵¹ As lumberjacks they were allowed to cut trees “to make dams”: however, their actual intention was to block the Germans or the militia and then throw grenades at them.

¹⁴⁵ DA Haute-Vienne, 1621 W 22 (10 May, 1944) Notes by the *Renseignements Généraux* on the people arrested in Périgueux.

¹⁴⁶ DA Lot-et-Garonne, 1737 W 12, File no. 794: François Kwig.

¹⁴⁷ DA Lot-et-Garonne, 1737 W 12, File no. 742: Fernand Debar.

¹⁴⁸ Valet, “Gitans et Voyageurs,” 211-219.

¹⁴⁹ DA Corrèze, 3U3 143, File Coussantien.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Valet, “Gitans et Voyageurs ,” 211-219.



Armed combats

The administrative divisional archives allowed us to identify fights between nomads and Germans, as the archives kept records of those who lost their lives.

Those who Died for France (Morts pour la France)

Finding nomads who died for France during the fighting of 1944-1945 is much more difficult than it would seem since memorials do not record, sometimes knowingly, the names of dead or deported nomads. For example, the town of Maurs (Cantal) did not include the names of four nomads of the Demestre and Gorgan families on its plaque commemorating the roundup of May 12, 1944.¹⁵² In other cases, the memorials mention names that do not mean anything to the inhabitants of the towns where their death occurred. This is the case of the commemorative plaque of Droué (Loiret) where a certain Bren appears in the last position on the plaque, shot August 2, 1944.¹⁵³ That day, the Germans “captured three members of the Resistance” and “shot them savagely after a brief interrogation.”¹⁵⁴ Among these three men was Edouard Bren, 35, who was a *forain*, yet the newspapers of the administrative division labelled him a nomad when reporting the event.

Persons classified as a nomad or “*forain*” were shot by the Germans in retaliation for some actions of the Resistance without knowing for certain whether those shot were in the resistance or not. Antoine Lafleur was shot on August 20, 1944 in Saint-Astier (Dordogne) by German troops in the aftermath of a fight with the Resistance. In the same way, several members of the Demestre and Gorgan families assigned to Maurs (Cantal) would be taken hostage on 12 May, 1944, then deported by a regiment of the SS *Das Reich* division.¹⁵⁵ Local historians questioned the links that the Demestre and the Gorgan families maintained with the *maquis* of Luzettes.¹⁵⁶ The same suspicion hung over three families murdered by the Germans on St. Sixte’s day: Why were they massacred? Were they armed, as claimed by the Germans?¹⁵⁷ It is only in memoirs written directly after the events that one can find mention of a nomadic family in which some members died for France. Emmanuel Filhol recalls that Jean Corriger in his book *The Liberation of St. Foy* tells how the Germans took prisoners and shot some members of the Tollet family:¹⁵⁸

¹⁵² Manuel Rispal, *Chouette Noisette et Luzettes, 1940-Juin 1944*, (Ytrac: Éditions Autrement, 2014), 69.

¹⁵³ “François Bren, nomade résistant?” (29 October, 2017) <http://filsduvent.kazeo.com/francois-bren-nomade-resistant-retrouve-fusille-a121152506>

¹⁵⁴ DA Loiret, 274 W 60689.

¹⁵⁵ DA Puy-de-Dôme, 908 W 48.

¹⁵⁶ Manuel Rispal, *Chouette Noisette et Luzettes, 1940-Juin 1944* (Ytrac: Éditions Autrement, 2014).

¹⁵⁷ DA Lot, 1 W 417.

¹⁵⁸ Emmanuel Filhol, “Pouvoirs publics et tsiganes après la libération”, in *Roms, Tsiganes, Nomades, Un malentendu européen*, eds. Catherine Coquio and Jean-Luc Poueyto (Paris: Karthala, 2014), 219.

On their way back to Eynesse, the same Germans catch a group of nine of our young people on a steep section of the road that leads to the Town Hall Square, whom they took as prisoner with them. They are five members of the same family: Eugène Tollet, 50: his two sons: Antoine, 21, and Joseph, 22, and his two brothers-in-law: Baptiste-Joseph, 29, and Baptiste-André, 26 years old.¹⁵⁹

The administrative divisional archives also keep track of these fighters, but not where you would expect—for example in the requests for the honour “*Mort pour la France*” (Died for France). However, we find mention of these fighters in simple correspondence between families and the prefecture. On October 6, 1945, Jean-Joseph Amador, 73, in compulsory residence in Bagnac (Lot) asked permission to visit the administrative division of Haute-Loire “to transfer the body of my grandson Antoine Fernandez, who was killed in the *maquis*, in this administrative division and who was buried at the place where he fell”.¹⁶⁰ Faced with a lack of response from the prefect of the Lot, the mayor of Bagnac wrote in turn to the prefect to attest to the veracity of the words of Jean-Joseph Amador. He confirmed to the prefect of the Lot that it was the prefect of the Haute-Loire who sent them a letter to pick up the body of the grandson who is currently in a mass grave.¹⁶¹ It was only after investigation by the French intelligence (*Renseignements Généraux*) that the prefect of the Lot allowed Jean-Joseph Amador, accompanied by his nephew, also a former member of a *maquis*, to visit the Haute-Loire.

Soldiers with the Free France (France Libre)

The files of the administrative divisional archives contain numerous reports revealing the identity of nomad combatants in the years 1944-1946. On 16 April, 1946, Helene Winterstein, was arrested away from her compulsory residence. She explained that she accompanied “[her] cousin Bernard Winterstein, soldier with the 107th Infantry Regiment and currently on leave”¹⁶² to Roumazières (Charente). Only after verifying the accuracy of Hélène Winterstein’s comments did the gendarmes agree to let her go. Another record from July 1945 tells us that Georges Reinhardt joined the Resistance after escaping from the Allied camp where his parents were also interned.¹⁶³

The census about nomads under compulsory residence and files of individual nomads also provide information on the military engagement of the men. For example, the status report on nomads of the Creuse in January 1946, mentions that Emile Duchêne was incorporated

¹⁵⁹ Jean Corriger, *La Libération de Sainte-Foy* (Comité de Libération de Sainte-Foy-la-Grande, 1945), 30.

¹⁶⁰ DA Lot, 1341 W 2 (6 October, 1945) Report regarding a travel authorization.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² DA Charente, 9 W 4 (29 April, 1945) Report regarding the arrest of Hélène Winterstein.

¹⁶³ DA Charente, 9 W 4 (13 July, 1945) Report regarding the arrest of Georges Reinhardt.



into a regiment in Brive and that Pierre Wiastersheim had just been demobilized.¹⁶⁴ Joseph Demestre's personal information sheet reveals that he was incorporated into the 13th Infantry Regiment from 1944 to 1945.¹⁶⁵ While their parents and their families were still under house arrest, the young men, who were part of the *Maquis*, were incorporated into different regiments. The group of Raymond Gurême was thus "in the barracks in Saint-Denis, in the Eastern fort East"¹⁶⁶ right after the liberation of Paris, but since the only prospect offered to him by the army was to return to Germany as a part of the occupation forces, he "climbed the wall with seven or eight friends"¹⁶⁷ and left the army.

On 6 May, 1944, Nicolas Dour, 21, and Joseph Toquard, 23, the former a nomad, the latter a *forain*, were arrested for armed robbery and possession of weapons. They were accused of having requisitioned farms in the administrative division of the Lot in the name of the *Maquis*. Nicolas Dour was assigned to a group of Cavaillon workers and never returned to his group after leave. Nicolas Dour and Joseph Toquard travelled through several hamlets of the Lot in late April 1944 asking for food contributions for the *maquis*. Informed by telephone of the presence of *maquisards* in a hamlet, gendarmes went and arrested Joseph Toquard. Nicolas Dour fled despite shots fired by the gendarmes. The gendarmes questioned the inhabitants of the hamlet who denied having been threatened by a weapon but who confirmed that they have given money and food to "those evaders". When Nicolas Dour was finally arrested, he denied being part of the *Maquis*, as did Joseph Toquard. However, the gendarmerie's investigation notes that there was a presumption that these two individuals were in fact a part of the Resistance movement, notably because of their discussion in one of the houses they requisitioned – about participating in the "sabotage of the Conduché tunnel [...] and that they were in the fight of Carjac on 10 April, 1944".¹⁶⁸ On 9 June, 1944, the Cahors' Court of Appeal sentenced them to 15 months in prison.¹⁶⁹ A report from February 1945 tells us that the two young men escaped from the prison. The police and judicial documents that allowed us to trace these events do not clearly reveal whether Joseph Toquard and Nicolas Dour were truly members of the *Maquis*. Some elements seem to point toward this direction: The fact that Nicolas Dour deserted a group of workers and that their activities coincided with the sabotage of the Conduché tunnel (April 6, 1944) and the Battle of Carjac where eight *maquis* (Francs-Tireurs et Partisans) besieged the city.

¹⁶⁴ DA Creuse, 152 W 5 (17 January, 1946) Census of the nomads compelled to a compulsory residence at Châtelus-le-Marcheix.

¹⁶⁵ DA Haute-Loire, 332 W 123, Nomad identity document of Joseph Demestre.

¹⁶⁶ Gurême, *Interdit aux nomades*, 154.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 158.

¹⁶⁸ DA Lot, 1109 W 26 (8 May, 1944) Report on armed-theft and death threats.

¹⁶⁹ DA Lot, 1109 W 28 (22 February, 1945) Report on the arrest of the *forain* Joseph Toquard.

5. Liberation and summer 1944

The prolongation of the internment and compulsory residence of the nomads until the end of 1946 has been highlighted by Emmanuel Filhol and Marie-Christine Hubert's historical research. The system of control of the movement of nomads was set up by the last government of the Third Republic, reinforced by Vichy and extended by the Provisional Government in 1944. Therefore, on 31 August, 1944, during the Liberation of Angoulême (Charente), the various resistance groups did not free the nomadic prisoners in the Alliers camp. On the contrary, they reinforced the surveillance of the camp by installing a French Forces of the Interior (FFI) post.¹⁷⁰

Despite the fact that a number of nomads were very active in the French Resistance, the "Liberation" did not extend to the nomads. Conversely, we will see that the summer of 1944 was one of the most painful and difficult periods for many interned nomad families (due to continued bombings), especially for those subjected to compulsory residence. Nomads were also the direct victims of extrajudicial purges¹⁷¹.

Distrust and executions of nomads

Memoirs of *maquisards* and resistance fighters report the distrust surrounding nomad family groups. Louis Olivet and André Aribaud, in their book on the FFI in the north-east and north-west of the Tarn-et-Garonne, transcribe the following testimony of a member of the Bir-Hakeim maquis:

*We are worried because we have been told that Gypsies saw our companions on the Dejean farm, then in Bretou. One is very wary of these Gypsies who go through the farms, identify the young people from the Resistance and then denounce them to the Germans. We are therefore obliged to leave.*¹⁷²

What these memoirs do not mention is that such suspicions were the pretext for summary executions of nomads by the *maquis* and certain FFI and Francs-tireurs et Partisans (FTP). In the nine administrative divisional archives that we visited where nomads were subjected to compulsory residency during the war, at least eighteen nomads were executed without trial in seven of these administrative divisions.¹⁷³

¹⁷⁰ DA Charente, 9 W 1 (September, 1944) Monthly report on the camp of the Alliers.

¹⁷¹ To have a more precise idea of the specific targeting of people belonging to the « Nomad » category, it is appropriate to compare for the same period the figure of nomad victims with the figure of victims in the general population.

¹⁷² Louis Olivet, André Aribaud, *Avant que mémoire ne meure*, Garonne (29 October, 2017) <http://resistance82.fr/le-maquis-bir-hakeim>

¹⁷³ DA Puy-de-Dôme; AD Corrèze; AD Haute-Loire; AD Cantal; AD Lot; AD Haute-Vienne; AD Lot et Garonne; AD Creuse; AD Loire.



We were led to these summary executions by Joseph Valet's article on the Voyageurs d'Auvergne during the Second World War.¹⁷⁴ The latter collected testimonies and monitored local press of the time. He explains that at the time of the Liberation "the unjust suspicion, formulated in the decree [i.e. 6 April, 1940], that they [i.e. the nomads] were ready to collaborate with the enemy had not disappeared from minds".¹⁷⁵ Four years later, the suspicion that nomads collaborated with the enemy was still in place and prejudice towards nomads spread.

Joseph Valet writes that, on the day of the liberation of Issoire (Puy-de-Dôme), the Schutt family was driven in a van throughout the city before the men were summarily executed in the cemetery. Joseph Valet received this information from one of the girls in this family, who escaped death because another nomad couple pretended that she was their own daughter. Our investigation began with this information, and took us to the archival box in the administrative divisional archives of Puy-de-Dôme that stores documents relating to the *Tonte des femmes* (when women's heads were shaved at the Liberation). We found a note in the archival box, from the *Renseignements Généraux*. The note reveals that a group of liberators killed an entire family without trial and without any evidence that they gave information to the Germans.

We have learned that the FFI executed by shooting on 2 September [i.e. 1944], at 7 pm, at Issoire cemetery,

SCHUTT François, born November 15, 1889 in Mancelle (Aveyron)

Célestin, May 9, .27 in Vindien (Vaucluse)

Henri, February 4, 1925 in ... (Gard)

Joseph, September 24, 1918 in Vic-le-Comte (Puy de Dôme)

GIMET Jeanne, August 27, 1926 in Saint-Babal (Puy de Dôme)

The Schutts worked as weavers. This is a father and his three sons.¹⁷⁶

Joseph Valet recounts other types of executions by resistance groups. In Menat (Puy-de-Dôme), the resistance fired on the trailers of the H. family, killing two children. At Riom, "the brave father G. was accused of collusion with the Militia. He was shot and buried in the dump".¹⁷⁷ Did such executions remain isolated?

We found that the summary executions of nomads by "resistant" fighters took place both before and after the liberation of different cities. André Mourtier, Fanny and their three children were under compulsory residence order in the Creuse. On August 31, 1944, the gendarmes noted that André Mourtier had left his compulsory residence. Fanny declared to them: "My husband André Mourtier left me on 31 July, 1944 to join the French Forces of the Interior. Since then, I have not received any news from him and I do not know where he is

¹⁷⁴ Valet, "Gitans et Voyageurs," *Études tsiganes*, no. 6 (1995): 211-219.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ AD Puy-de-Dôme, 311 W 44 (9 September, 1944) Note by the *Renseignements Généraux* on the death of the Schutt family.

¹⁷⁷ Joseph Valet, "Le racisme anti-gitan", *Monde Gitan*, no. 23 (1972): 1-6.

now”.¹⁷⁸ A month and a half later, the gendarmes returned to check in on the Mourtier family and ask Fanny if she knew where her husband was. She answered: “As for my husband, nomad Mourtier (André), I have heard lately that he had been executed on 2 August, 1944, by patriots, I cannot tell you anything certain about his situation”.¹⁷⁹

These executions, and internment of nomad men, led to the creation of family groups entirely of women. In April 1945, in the Lot, a brigade was surprised by a family consisting only of three women, their children and a donkey. After investigation, they discovered that Virginie Fabre was the wife of François Steimbach, who was “suspected of anti-French actions, shot in July 1944 by a resistance security team, Castelfranc (Lot)”¹⁸⁰ and Julia Fabre, partner of Émile Capelot, imprisoned in Noé’s camp for abandoning his compulsory residence. François Steimbach was not the only “bohemian” to have been summarily executed in the Lot. A police document taking stock of executions prior to August 17, 1944 by the maquis reads: “Carney – nomad; Lafleur, Antonin – nomad; Steimbach, François – nomad”.¹⁸¹

The documents that note the summary execution of nomads provide almost no information on the justifications for these acts. When reasons are mentioned, they appear to be only “rumours”. The archives of the Haute-Loire contain a document about the killing of two brothers in the Resistance noting that “the rumour accuses the inhabitants of a caravan of bohemians”¹⁸². As a result of these rumours, “the chief of this tribe, a man named Blachon, was arrested and later shot by the *maquis* of Montbuzat”. No further information about the event is provided.

Posthumous inquiry

No investigation was opened regarding these summary executions. One exception occurred in Haute-Vienne with the death of Emile Lafleur, 15 at the time of his execution by “a group of *maquisards* on the territory of the town of Château-Chervix, in August 1944.”¹⁸³ On 15 February, 1951, following a note from the Prosecutor of the Republic of Limoges an investigation was opened for “murder” of the persons of Sylvain Lafleur, Émile Lafleur and Georges Dorkel, whose corpses were discovered on the territory of the town of Château-Chervix (Haute-Vienne).

Sylvain and Émile Lafleur were father and son, George Dorkel was Émile Lafleur’s cousin. These men were part of a family of *forains* who used to travel within the administrative divisions near Puy-de-Dôme. The inspector in charge of the case noted that Lafleur left Limoges when Emile was thirteen years old. In 1943, the family returned to Haute-Vienne where they were subjected to compulsory residence in the town of Pierre-Buffière. Émile’s mother was

¹⁷⁸ DA Creuse, 152 W 5 (31 August, 1944) Report on André Mourtier.

¹⁷⁹ DA Creuse, 152 W 5 (19 October, 1944) Report on André Mourtier.

¹⁸⁰ DA Lot, 729 W 34 (14 April, 1945) Report.

¹⁸¹ DA Lot, 1109 W 1009, List of executed persons in the Lot.

¹⁸² DA Haute-Loire, 996 W 257, Report on war crimes in the Haute-Loire department.

¹⁸³ DA Haute-Vienne, 1517 W 510 (13 February, 1951) Report on Émile Lafleur.



punished once for petty theft. Aside from this, the family had never been the subject of complaints, until the night of 12 August, 1944, when a couple of farmers, the Benvegnu family, had their house burgled. Following the burglary, the FTP battalion in the area arrested six nomads: Marc Pique, Émile Dubois, Paul Sauzer, Sylvain Lafleur, Émile Lafleur and Georges Dorkel. They accused them of having participated in armed aggression, including against the Benvegnu couple and “of having tried to divert parachutes intended for the *maquis*.”¹⁸⁴ On 15 August, 1944, the group presented these nomads to the Benvegnu couple, who, however, did not recognize them. Marie Benvegnu said on 5 June, 1945 that she later learned that “three of the individuals arrested by the FFI. had been shot.”¹⁸⁵ On 17 August, 1944, Émile Lafleur, Sylvain Lafleur and Georges Dorkel were shot by the same group of FTP.

During the investigation conducted in 1951, an inspector of the judicial police interviewed Jeanne Capelot who was the wife of Sylvain Lafleur, the mother of Émile Lafleur and the aunt of Georges Dorkel. She recounted the arrest of the men in her family and explained that she still did not understand the reasons for their execution since the burgled couple had not recognized any of the nomads arrested. However, she explained to the inspector that she knew three members of the *maquis* who arrested them and resided in the locality, contradicting the assertion of the mayor who claimed not to know any of the members of the battalion. These three members of the *maquis* were Roux, Leomont and Baudin. The inspector of the judicial police then proceeded to investigate who these people were and managed to question Albert Roux, who was 19 years old in 1944. He explained that on 14 August, 1944, under the orders of his group leader “Jojo”, Joseph Claquin, he went to arrest several nomads, including women, and turned them over to his chief. He stated that from that moment on he had not dealt further with the matter. The young man denied having contact with these nomads, and did not say that he knew them. Jeanne Capelot testified to the fact that they lived in the same locality and that she knew them personally. The judicial police were unable to find Joseph Claquin, the so-called “Jojo”, but collected information about him: he served in the navy until he committed a “deceitful act prejudicial to men under his command” and had to retire to Brittany. The investigation concluded that proof of guilt of the executors was never determined and that, even if it were to be proven, it is certain that these nomads had no relationship with the Occupation or the Militia and that they then acted solely out of “personal interest.”¹⁸⁶

Trials of nomads

While some nomads were the victims of summary executions, others were arrested in the early days of the Liberation. One of the first actions of some residents of the town of Blanzat (next to Clermont-Puy-de-Dôme) after the liberation (7 September, 1944) was to go collectively to the place where families of nomads were under compulsory residence.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ DA Haute-Vienne, 1517 W 510 (5 June, 1945) Statement by Marie Benvegnu.

¹⁸⁶ DA Haute-Vienne, 1517 W 510 (6 September, 1945) Report by the judicial police.

These inhabitants, were accompanied by an FFI lieutenant and a sergeant major (92nd RI Riom), Maurice Beaujean, 34, and Fernand Diot, 23 years. They arrested seven men, all of whom were head of families: Charles Calpeau, Paul Pister, Jean Gargowitch, Antoine Ugargovitch, Henri Pister, Julien Peringale and Joseph Peringale. The FFI officers then took the persons under arrest to the barracks of the 92nd RI of Riom. There, the seven men were photographed: the archives contain two photographs in which these men can be seen lined up, with identification numbers from 1 to 7. These photographs served as a basis for the investigation conducted by the inspectors of the judicial police of Clermont-Ferrand who asked the inhabitants of various nearby towns if they recognized these men. Of the 47 respondents, only one would say that he recognized one of them. However, all of those men were accused of “acts of plunder to the detriment of the small farmers” and of “participating in police operations carried out by the Germans and the militia.”¹⁸⁷ Although the final indictment stated that these accusations were based only on “rumours that had been spread”, this did not prevent the court from upholding the charge of “collaboration with the enemy.” The seven men were first transferred from the barracks of the regiment to prison, and then to the Aigueperse camp where they would spend the next year awaiting their trial.

What evidence was there against these seven men? The mayor of Blanzat reportedly received “numerous complaints about theft of fruit, wood, vegetables” during the Occupation and the inhabitants of Blanzat complained about “fights that broke out in these tribes, without any respect for order, hygiene, modesty and dignity”, and the young Charles Capleau, 19, was said to have travelled frequently “for periods of one to four days to unknown destinations”. The indictments presented at their trial on 24 August, 1945 in the Riom Court of Justice, almost a year after their arrest, were based only on the reputation of those subject to compulsory residence in Blanzat. The proof of guilt of these men depended on a statement given by Charles Capleau, the youngest of the seven men, who, when arrested, admitted to having pretended to be a maquisard, to have been in contact with militiamen and gone in search of STO deserters. The trial in the Riom Court of Justice was based solely on this confession. However, as soon as the seven men left the barracks of the 92nd RI of Riom, Charles Capleau retracted his confession and “denied it entirely”.¹⁸⁸ Indeed, it is very likely that Charles Capleau’s confession was obtained under torture. Joseph Valet who spoke with these men, and knew them personally, explained that “they were implored to confess” adding that, “the youngest C. was burned on the back: thirty years later, he still has the marks”.¹⁸⁹ Six men out of the seven arrested were tortured in the barracks, only one was not questioned there: Jean Gargowitch who was part of the 92nd RI Riom in which he had served in 1933 and had been mobilized again for five months in 1939-1940. Concluding that “their guilt is not sufficiently established”, the Riom Court of Justice released the seven accused.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁷ DA Puy-de-Dôme, 107 W 259 (31 July, 1945) Final information laid out by the public prosecutor.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁹ Joseph Valet, “Le racisme antigitan”, *Monde Gitane*, no. 23 (1972): 1-6.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*



One month later (18 September, 1945), the same court would also issue a judgment in the case of Michel Horn, 19, accused of “conspiring with the enemy”.¹⁹¹ In 1943, Horn was suspected of providing his cousin of the same name, Michel Horn, 27, with information on the location of the Lezoux maquis, where the brother of the latter, Émile Horn, was hiding with others. Michel Horn, 27, and Émile Horn had an intense hatred of each other. Michel Horn, 27, reportedly threatened to kill his younger cousin Michel Horn, 19, if he did not reveal the place where his brother, Émile was hiding with the other resistance fighters. The elder Michel, “intended to send him [i.e. Émile] to Germany”.¹⁹² Michel Horn first admitted to what he was accused of, then, like Charles Capleau, denied having confessed to these accusations. When the inspectors from the judicial police, responsible for conducting the investigation, questioned Antonin Rondet, the former civilian leader in charge of the united groups of the resistance (*Mouvements Unis de la Résistance* or MUR), residing in Lezoux, he declared that “there was no expedition, neither by the militia nor by the Germans in the woods of Lezoux, since there were never any *maquis* before July 1944”.¹⁹³ However, the trial of 19-year-old Michel Horn was based on the fact that he reported the location of the *maquis* of Lezoux, where his brother was in 1943, to the militia, and that this denunciation would have resulted in an expedition by the militia. On the day of the hearing, 18 September, 1945, the Commissioner of the Government acknowledged that the charges were not serious and that “no evidence exists proving Horn’s guilt”. After the deliberation of the jury, Michel Horn, 19, was released, “without penalty or court costs”.¹⁹⁴

The Riom Court of Justice would also hold other trials for nomads accused of conspiring with the enemy. The Horn, Lautrec and Bony families were accused of having murdered English parachutists, but, owing to the testimonies of former *maquisards* and English soldiers, it was discovered that the paratroopers were already dead before reaching the ground and the case against them was dismissed.¹⁹⁵ These trials hint at the fact that, in many cases, the accused were not only innocent of the charges against them, but also had links with several *maquis*.

However, some defendants were less fortunate, including those who were tried immediately after being arrested by a court martial. An entire family of nomads subjected to compulsory residency at Vic-le-Comte (Puy-de-Dôme), the Schutt family (probably related to the Schutts who were murdered in the cemetery of Issoire) were arrested on 10 July, 1944. Their trailer was searched and two rifles and a revolver were found. Catherine Horn, Joseph Schutt and their three children Nicolas, Jacques and Antoine, respectively, 21, 19 and 17 years old were accused of “robbery and receiving stolen goods” and “looting in a time of war”. The three boys, one of whom was an STO deserter, were hiding in the woods with two other men, who were also deserters (but not nomads). Faced with such accusations, the Schutt family chose

¹⁹¹ DA Puy-de-Dôme, 107 W 259, File “Michel Horn”.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ DA Puy-de-Dôme, 107 W 259 (22 June, 1945) Hearing.

¹⁹⁴ DA Puy-de-Dôme, 1475 W 2.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

to “tell the whole truth” and admitted that the boys committed some petty thievery.¹⁹⁶ Antoine Schutt, 17, declared that “[we] all went together to the garden of Sir Montagnon where we stole a certain amount of artichoke heads and rhubarb [...] my mother made jam with the rhubarb” he said. He confessed to committing other petty thefts including of “two rabbits in the hut of Mr. Goutbelle”.¹⁹⁷ But these statements were not enough to condemn them. The report of Commissioner Albert of the Regional Police Brigade of the Police of Clermont then accused them of being responsible for 46 burglaries committed in the region and “having received a reward for having indicated a cache of arms that the Germans carried away”. He declared, that “they [i.e. the Schutts] are all very badly considered in this region and that their arrest was greeted with great satisfaction by the respectable population of this town.”¹⁹⁸ The court martial of Clermont-Ferrand sentenced them to 10 to 20 years of hard labour. On 8 June, 1945, a circular issued by the Directorate of Criminal Affairs stated that some trials conducted at the time of the Liberation were “illegitimate”. The Schutts were “people who were sentenced after the liberation through such a trial”.¹⁹⁹

One wonders about the reasons for the large number of trials, particularly in the Puy-de-Dôme, indicting nomads following the liberation. A note from the prefect of Clermont-Ferrand provides some explanations. A father and his son, François and Charles Bony, both nomads, were also arrested following the liberation and interned as “dangerous for national security”. They were arrested by a group of FFI. François Bony declared that he knew the men who arrested him and that the latter acted solely out of “personal revenge”.²⁰⁰ On 15 January, 1945, the prefect of Clermont-Ferrand asked that these two men be released immediately, disagreeing with the opinion, provided by a screening commission, that asked that these men be interned for a “long time”. The prefect wrote that it was a “prejudice against the Bohemians that seems to have guided the screening commission.”²⁰¹ However, this “prejudice against the Bohemians” did not only arise in the new institutions of Puy-de-Dôme, similar cases occurred in other administrative divisions as well. Thus, in Charente, twenty people of the Lenestour family were arrested by the FFI after the mayor of the town in which they were in compulsory residence reported them as “living from marauding”.²⁰² They too were accused of conspiring with the enemy. While these families were interned as “dangerous” awaiting trial, the mayor wrote to the prefect that there was still a donkey in the field they occupied, that this donkey was doing damage, and asked for permission to get rid of it. The prefect of Charente then intervened in favour of the Lenestours, instructing the mayor not to touch the donkey, as he was in the midst of releasing the wrongly accused family.

¹⁹⁶ DA Puy-de-Dôme, 107 W 381.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ DA Puy-de-Dôme, 107 W 376.

²⁰⁰ DA Puy-de-Dôme, 311 W 15.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² DA Charente, 1 W 91 (7 September, 1944) Letter from the mayor of Saint-Angeau to the Prefect of Charente.



This phenomenon of groups of liberators arresting nomad families seems significant in relation to the relatively small number of families in compulsory residence on French territory in 1944. But this phenomenon has not yet been studied as one of the consequences of uncontrolled purges. One can imagine that, those wrongly accused of conspiring with the enemy, often failed to pursue the matter further, given the serious nature of the accusations and the difficulty in incriminating members of the FFI, who were national heroes. Writer Matéo Maximoff was also incriminated by the FFI. During the night of 13 to 14 July 1944, he and his family, who were in compulsory residence in a villa in the town of Séméac (Hautes-Pyrénées), were shot at by a group of FFI. Maximoff discusses this incident in his book, *Routes sans roulettes* (Roads without caravans), stating that it was not the resistance fighters who attacked them.²⁰³ However, in the archives of the Hautes-Pyrénées, information relating to this event, including a police report and a letter from the prefect of the Hautes-Pyrénées dating from July 1945, mention that the incident was an “attack against their [the Maximoff family] house” by the FFI, who suspected them of being linked to the Gestapo.²⁰⁴ Certain FFI groups suspected the Maximoffs of collaboration with the enemy and profiteering during the Occupation. The archives of the Hautes-Pyrénées undoubtedly disprove the second accusation: The Maximoffs were interned in the Lannemezan camp until October 1943; and under these difficult conditions, Nicolas Maximoff, Matéo’s uncle, sold some of the family gold to meet their needs. He was also fined for “trafficking gold” on 5 November, 1943 by the Bagnères-de-Bigorre Criminal Court²⁰⁵. The trial reveals that it was the jeweller of Lannemezan who took advantage of Nicolas’s difficult situation to buy his gold below market value. Concerning the accusation of being linked to the Gestapo, the archives reveal that on October 2, 1944, Nicolas Maximoff, Jean Maximoff, Yvonne Maximoff, Carmen Sabas, and two people of the Filipoff family were arrested by the FFI in Paris, and interned at the Ger camp before being transferred to the Noé camp.²⁰⁶ We have not found any evidence of a trial; they were released by administrative decree in April 1945. A document noting the release of Carmen Sabas suggests that the accusations against the Maximoff family were the result of prejudice: “the former internee is released. However, because of the rather particular manner of acquisition of French nationality, through marriage to a stateless person, he himself having been naturalized French, but of Russian origin and above all, a Gypsy, the former internee may legitimately be suspected of lack of loyalty to France”.²⁰⁷ The Maximoffs were released from the camp but would continue to be subjected to compulsory residence in their Montreuil-sous-Bois home (from May 1945 until an unknown date).

²⁰³ Matéo Maximoff, *Route sans roulettes* (Éditions Maximoff, 1993), 147.

²⁰⁴ DA Hautes-Pyrénées, 226 W 27.

²⁰⁵ DA Hautes-Pyrénées, 3U Bagnières (5 November, 1943) Nicolas Maximoff.

²⁰⁶ DA Haute-Garonne, 5651 W 108, Individual form of the internees in the Noé camp.

²⁰⁷ Hoover Institution Archives, Carmen Maximoff (née Sabas), Kurt Werner Schaechter collection, Box 6, Folder 7.

6. Conclusions

The release of nomads from internment camps and compulsory residence allowed these families to begin contemplating their next priorities in life. Often, their main priorities was to be reunited – despite six years of dispersion all over France – and to renew family ties, although family members were often missing. Raymond Gurême, for instance, did not discover the fate of his close relatives until 1950. It is only by chance, and after numerous encounters that he met someone who finally disclosed to him that his parents were living near Vielsalm in Belgium:

About two kilometres from Vielsalm, I saw a young woman carrying a basket under her arm. Her gait seemed familiar to me. I turned around. She did too. Then I shouted, “Doll”! While she yelled “Raymond!” at the exact same time. She ran to throw herself into my arms, dropped the basket, letting all her things fall out on the road. It was my little sister Marie-Rose, whom we called “Doll” because she was so beautiful with her long hair. I cried like a child.²⁰⁸

However, some people were never able to find their relatives. Jean-Joseph Amador never saw his grandson again, discovering that he had died in Haute-Loire as a soldier. Edouard Bren’s children would never find their father, who had passed away under similar circumstances. The nomads’ world was constantly marked by family reunions and separations: Groups would come together, before being split up again. War did not only put an end to this cycle of separations and reunions, but also caused nomads’ families to experience an increase in the loss of the loved ones. Instead of supporting the rebuilding of the nomads’ life, post-war governments continued to enforce the law of 16 July, 1912. It was not until March 1964 that the circular of March 1935, which forbade the Demestre family from travelling together, was considered “no longer applicable”.²⁰⁹

It was only long after the war that some of the nomads requested official recognition of what they had experienced during World War II, including internment and deportation, as well as for recognition of their participation in the Resistance or for simple acts of resistance. These requests often went without response.²¹⁰ Raymond Gurême burnt his FFI armband when his request for a political inmate card was denied under the pretext of an undetermined act of delinquency.²¹¹ In 1972, after Bietschyka Gorgan requested to be recognized as an internee and deportee, the prefect of Cantal opened an inquiry to find out “under what administrative decision the Gorgan family had been placed under compulsory residence during the occupation of the municipality of Maurs”. On 25 April, 1972, the French police replied to the prefect

²⁰⁸ Gurême, *Interdit aux nomades*, 166.

²⁰⁹ DA Hautes-Pyrénées, 349 W 75.

²¹⁰ Emmanuel Filhol, *La mémoire et l’oubli: l’internement des Tsiganes en France, 1940-1946* (Paris, L’Harmattan, 2004)

²¹¹ Raymond Gurême, *Interdit aux nomades* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 2011), 121.

that they could not find “any trace of an administrative decision of compulsory residency [...] concerning the Gorgan family” and that their “Israelite origin” probably explains why some of them were deported.²¹² However, the Gorgans are not of “Israelite origin” and the Cantal administrative divisional archives contain much information on the house arrest of the Gorgan family. One can find in the very same file, both the compulsory residence orders, as well as the refusal to recognize the Bietschyka Gorgan family as former internees, on the grounds that they were never subjected to compulsory residency. Furthermore, although the French police acknowledged that the “Maurs roundup”, following which Bietschyka Gorgan was deported to Buchenwald, was an “anti-*maquis*” operation “carried out by the Das Reich SS Division”²¹³, it also stated that it did not appear that B. Gorgan had belonged to a resistance organization.²¹⁴ Our paper seeks to demonstrate that nothing justifies such a statement, and instead asserts that, like Raymond Gurême, Henri Kling and many others, Bietschyka Gorgan’s status as a “nomad” overrode his role in the Resistance, and explains why his participation in the Resistance was never recognized.

Official recognition of the French administration’s participation in the internment of nomads during World War II only occurred many years after the war (2016), and was also marked by a refusal to recognize the important role “nomads” played in the French Resistance. Many actions which took place at the time of the Liberation even showed that the 1940 charges of conspiring with the enemy – that served to legitimize the nomads’ internment – were brought up again by the FFI five years later, resulting in savage executions for collaboration or looting. There is no doubt that internment and compulsory residence, as well as the refusal by the Office of Veterans and War Victims²¹⁵ to recognize nomads as Resistance members or STO deserters, could partly explain the reluctance of historians’ to use the word “resistance” when discussing certain actions carried out by the nomads.

This reluctance could also come from the widespread idea that the nomads would not concern themselves with the conflicts of *gadje*²¹⁶ (“This is not our war”, one “Gypsy” is reported to have said). Is this prejudice, real malevolence or just ignorance? The involvement of nomads’ in combat was not rare. They can count their heroes in every single European war. These multiple acts of resistance were not simple “survival tactics”. The nomads actively fought against policies that negatively affected them. Since the Nazi Occupation of France was a direct threat to nomads, it is without doubt that they fought against it.

²¹² DA Cantal, 2025 W 61, File no. 7988: Bitschika Gorgan.

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Bietschyka Gorgan has been photographed by French photographer Mathieu Pernot. See, Mathieu Pernot, *Tsiganes*, Arles, Actes Sud, 1999.

²¹⁵ *Office National des Anciens Combattants et Victimes de Guerre* or ONAC.

²¹⁶ Romani word for non-Roma people.

